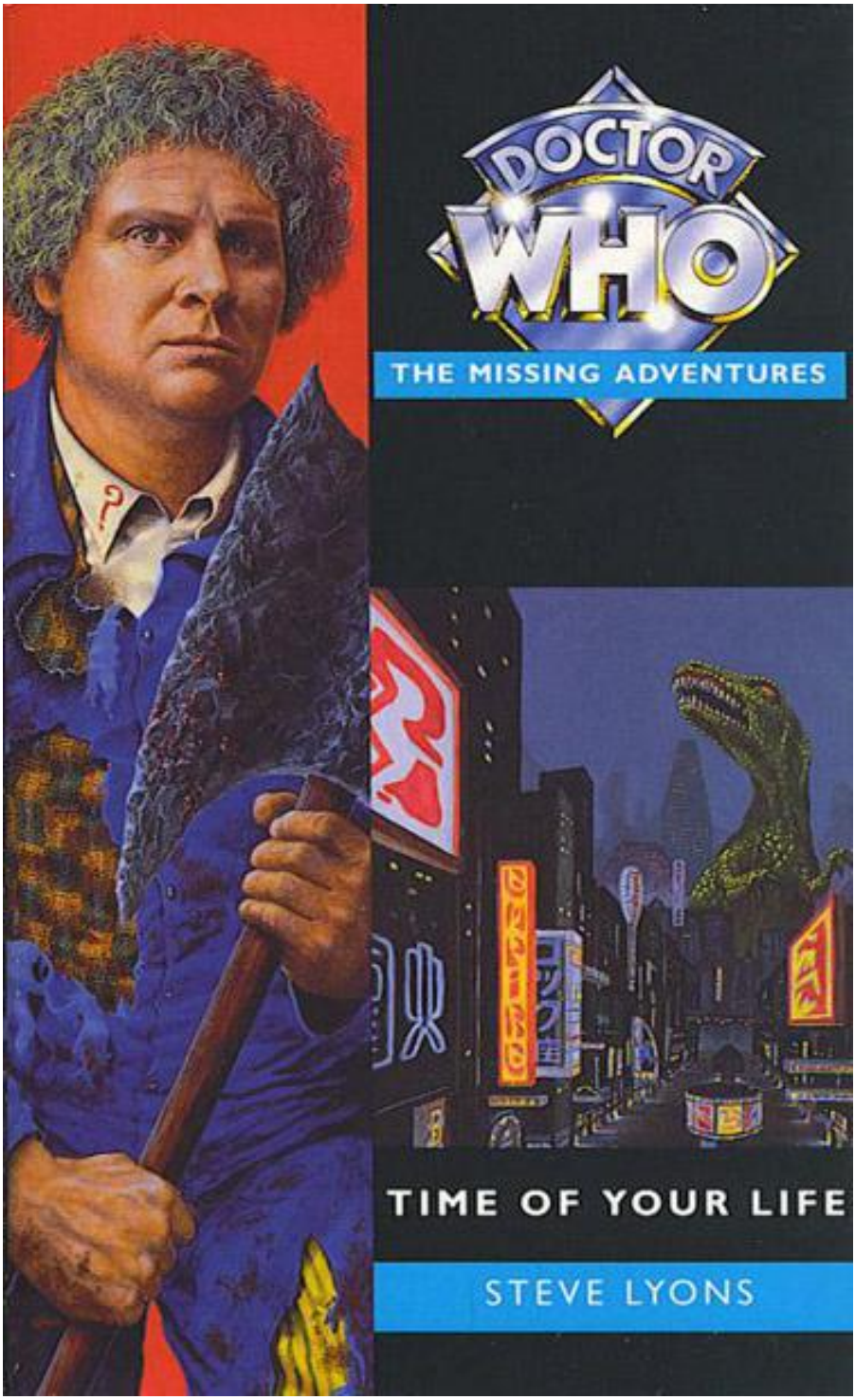
DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES

TIME OF YOUR LIFE

STEVE LYONS


DOCTOR
WHO
THE MISSING ADVENTURES
TIME OF YOUR LIFE
STEVE LYONS

T I M E O F Y O U R L I F E

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE SIXTH DOCTOR.

‘ORGANIC BUGS MUST BE PURGED FROM THE SYSTEM,’ THE SCREEN TOLD

HIM. THEN, MORE SUCCINTLY, ‘YOU DIE.’

The Network broadcasts entertainment to the planets of the Meson system: Death-hunt 3000, Prisoner: The Next Generation, Bloodsoak Bunny... Sixteen channels, and not one of them worth watching. but for the citizens of poverty-striken Torrok, television offers the only escape from a reality too horrible to face.

Angela, a young inhabitant of Torrok, leaps at the chance to travel to the Network with a hermit who calls himself the Doctor.

However, all is not well on the giant, chaotic space station. A soap star has murdered his wife’s lover; the robotic regulars of Timeriders are performing random kidnappings; and a lethal new game show is about to go on the air.

Can the Doctor uncover the cause of the apparently random disturbances — or will his appearance as a competitor on Death-hunt 3000 be the last of his life?

This adventure takes place immediately after the television story **THE ULTIMATE FOE**.

STEVE LYONS is the author of **CONUNDRUM**, one of the most popular Doctor Who New Adventures, and is a co-author of the best-selling **RED DWARF PROGRAMME GUIDE**.

ISBN 0 426 20438 7

TIME OF YOUR LIFE

Steve Lyons

First published in Great Britain in 1995 by Doctor Who Books

an imprint of Virgin Publishing Ltd SF 332 Ladbroke Grove London W1O 5AH

Copyright © Steve Lyons 1995

The right of Steve Lyons to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

'Doctor Who' series copyright © British Broadcasting Corporation 1995

ISBN 0 426 20438 7

Cover illustration by Paul Campbell

Typeset by Galleon Typesetting, Ipswich

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berks

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated

without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

CONTENTS

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

With thanks to Neil Harding for the computer jargon, to Chris Howarth for the Godzilla reference and to Simon Burney for helping brainstorm the future of a certain TV show.

One

ut first, this:'

'B '– three weeks into Earth year 2191, and –'

'– the money, or open the –'

'– morning on the Children's Channel, it's *Screaming and Kicking* with –'

'– my baby too, Kylie. You can't –'

'Now, for a fridge-freezer:'

Sixteen channels, not one of interest. Back to Network One then, where the adverts had finished and Angela's programme was back on air. She considered whether to wake her mother, dozing peacefully in the armchair. She decided not. She looked contented for once, and she could always catch a repeat showing. Besides, it suited her to be alone. Today, she was leaving her world for the first time. As soon as *Jubilee Towers* finished.

It was something that Angela had dreamed of for months.

Ever since the day the medics had come, an hour late, to take her sister Ruth away. Strange how it was only then that she had discovered the crack; a gap between two planks in the hallway, a chink in the armour which kept reality outside. It afforded her a first glimpse of daylight, a thousand times more beautiful than the TV screen's electric glow. She had tried to prise the wood away, to see more, but the nails were driven in too tightly, the wonders of the world without locked firmly away from curious eyes.

The door, however, was a different matter. She had helped her mother open it, easing the stiff hinges when they came for Ruth. She had been sent upstairs before the last bolt was drawn. There were dangers for a young girl out there. The Watchers – worse still, perhaps, the Peace Keepers. She'd remembered where the key was hidden, all the same. She knew for certain then that, one day, she would use it.

She thought of little else today, not even the latest intricacies of the soap opera plot. She had been a big *Towers* fan once; she had even had a crush on Raymond Day, the handsome actor who portrayed Adam Romance. She was over all that. Angela was no longer a teenager, and it was harder to escape reality in such ways.

The action finished, the commercials began again. There was little point in watching. There were no big businesses on Torrok, no one who could afford the Network's exorbitant advertising rates. This was the forgotten planet, to which the cameras never came. Angela wondered what was out beyond the bunker, what they were hiding from her.

Despite all that, she hesitated as she fished the key out from the car-shaped ornament. There had always been something stopping her before: the fear of Mum seeing, the lure of a programme, her sister entreating her to play one last game on the VRG system. There was nothing this time.

So Angela left her world today. A high point, in an existence dominated by the computer monitor and the television screen.

A chance to learn what life was about, beyond the concrete seclusion in which she had spent her twenty years thus far.

And it was beautiful, at first.

She had never seen the suns before. Their pure, natural radiation made her skin tingle and she loved the warm feeling on her neck. The air was magnificent, more sweet than she might ever have dreamed. The silence too was exhilarating, a sharp contrast to the inane chatterings of the TV. But then, the rest of it wasn't at all how she had imagined.

The city was all dirt and rubble and graffiti sprayed on solid cement walls. It smelt of decades of neglect, not a marvellous secret world but a dead one, long forgotten. Angela had hoped somehow to see the black asphalt roads of Leena or the glittering silver spires of Meson Primus. The stark reality left her empty and confused.

She thought of Ruth, carried out into this wilderness, a victim of the dangers of the inside. Her father, never returning from it, slain by outside perils. It had been three days before the Peace Keepers found his body. The Watchers had got to him, waylaid him at the water plant as he arrived to carry out routine maintenance. It had come as no surprise; they had all expected it to happen. It was dangerous outside. If you went outside, you died.

Angela could not move any further. She looked out at the world she had longed for, but past fears and superstitions dragged her back to the one she had always known. She pushed the heavy door back into place, ramming bolts home one by one. Back to electric lighting. Back to artificial air. She cursed herself for her weakness, and she swore then that this would not be the end.

Another day, another programme line-up. Gazing blankly at the screen, mother asleep again as she so often was these days.

In progress on Option-8, *Death-Hunt 3000*:

‘A huge round of applause please, as we teleport our surviving contestant out of the sphere and back into the studio.’ Ecstatic cheers, the air shimmering momentarily, a huge barbarian figure appearing alongside the smiling host.

‘Anjor, congratulations! *Death-Hunt* winner three times running, that’s thirty million dollars you have to take back to Gluton with you. What do you plan to do with all that lovely loot?’

The barbarian knocked the proffered microphone from his interviewer’s hand. He didn’t seem to need it.

‘Gonna burn the lot!’ he roared, his deep resonant voice carrying easily across the studio. ‘Only winning matters!’

‘You surely can’t be coming back again?’

‘Coming back again... and winning!’ bellowed Anjor, punching a fist into the air and whipping the enthusiastic audience into a frenzy.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, let’s hear it for our most... spirited contestant yet: the unbelievable Anjor! Is he really unbeatable too? Find out next week, when he battles against five new contestants in the *Death-Hunt* sphere, in a contest that only one can survive. Bye for now.’ A wave and a grin and the credits rolled. The studio ceiling opened, showering thousand-dollar notes onto the triumphant warrior.

It took Angela almost a full minute to turn the set off. She had rarely used that particular control and she was unsure how to find it. The silence that filled the room then was an unaccustomed one, and it reminded her of the silence outside.

When she thought about it later, she didn’t remember approaching the door. She just arrived there, heart pounding, flesh tingling with a mixture of anticipation and fear. She forced her unwilling arms to reach, her hands to grip the handle and pull. And for the second time, the portal opened for her.

The sunlight flooded in again, and Angela brimmed with an energy she had rarely known. She didn’t dare stand still, didn’t want to think about what she was doing. She wouldn’t falter this time. She took the first few hesitant steps, pausing six paces into the open, hardly believing where she was. Another minute passed. Then, slowly, she tiptoed back towards the door and closed it. Only this time, from the outside.

And, despite the stories of her childhood, nothing awful happened.

She could barely sleep that night. She thought about the outside, about the things she had discovered there. She had even seen water – real water, not reprocessed cubes. It was thick and oily and unfit to drink, but it was miraculously real and so very, very wonderful. She had sat by the stream and laughed insanely, cupping handfuls to her forehead and letting black rivulets streak down her face.

Her initial disappointment soon wore off – her fears, too –

as she explored the city day by day. This may not be the world she'd hoped for, but still it was exciting; an undiscovered country, many times bigger than the four walls of her concrete cocoon. She gained confidence as she began to learn her way around, making mental notes of all hiding places should she need them. She did so twice that first week, diving for cover as robotic Peace Keepers swept by on patrol.

She found a silver pyramid, squatting at the city's centre, sleek and bright and gorgeous, like some remnant from the fantasy world she had so hoped to find. Her hand slipped off its surface as though a film of oil covered it, and she saw it was uniquely free of painted obscenities. She couldn't get inside though. It seemed impregnable, like all the buildings.

She wished she knew what lay within. No matter where she roamed, she always found herself returning to it.

She watched a spacecraft land from Meson Primus. The Meson Banking Corporation, making their pick-up of torrodium ore from the automated refinery, leaving vital machine spares and food supplies in payment. For a breathless half-second, she considered making a run for the ship. If she could board it undetected, she could filially see the primary planet without the mediation of a camera. She dismissed the idea when its occupants disembarked. Four men, clad in riot gear and armed with heavy-duty blasters, expecting trouble.

On their return journey, they got it.

A whistle sounded from behind a mound of sunbaked mud.

From all directions, youths converged on the offworlders, wearing leathers and ripped jeans, brandishing knives and sticks and rocks. White eyes were painted crudely on the backs of their jackets. These, Angela realized with a thrill of excitement, were the Watchers.

The Mesons reacted quickly. Guns snapped up and came to bear. Six thugs were down before the first reached their quarry. A brief scuffle followed, knives snapping against combat armour, knuckledusters grazing shaved heads. The Watchers were downed in seconds, moaning and whimpering in the dust, few of them mustering the energy even to hurl pointless challenges after the departing vessel.

Angela shivered, crept slowly away from that place and returned home with all speed. The Mesons had humiliated their attackers. She didn't want them taking their frustrations out on her.

The following week, she saw the hermit for the first time. Like her, he seemed to be exploring the city. In contrast, he showed no regard for the dangers it contained. He walked unhurriedly, his back stooped, his hands plunged deep within his pockets and his feet taking casual potshots at the debris. Angela was fascinated by his attitude and his bearing, by his handsome, almost devilish features and by the outlandish clothes he wore.

His colourful patchwork coat, she thought, was a sign either of a highly developed taste or of a total lack of it. She couldn't decide which. The hermit didn't fit here on Torrok, of that much she was certain. He was probably a stranger to the system itself. And because of that, he fascinated her like nothing real had ever done before.

She followed him for a while, keeping quiet and low so that he wouldn't detect her presence. Several times she lost him, panicking as she rounded a corner to see that he was no longer there. She would find him in the most unlikely spots, places he couldn't possibly have reached without having walked straight past her. That increased her interest all the more.

When he vanished for the last time, she was determined to search again. For the next few days she looked, sometimes catching the odd glimpse, watching him for minutes at a time before he disappeared and was lost. Sometimes, in those stolen moments, he would shout up to the heavens, although she didn't understand the words he spoke. He was angry about something, but she sensed some deep sorrow in him too. She wanted to talk to him, but it had been so long since she had really, truly spoken to anyone, she didn't even have the nerve to try.

So each day she maintained her distance and each evening she would be home by 1730. Sitting before the television, her mother asleep by her side, the evening instalment of *Jubilee Towers* airing, but never

really watching it.

One fateful day, they found her. She had been looking for the hermit, scouring his usual haunts, and experience had made her careless. Her eyes were searching the ruins to the south as she passed the heavily barricaded food storage building. By the time she saw the Peace Keeper, it was too late.

'Remain-still!' it barked. She should have run, but the robots' firepower was legendary. It moved closer, its squat, trapezoid form hovering three feet above the ground to bring its visual sensor on a level with her eyes. 'You-are-violating-curfew. State-name-and-identification-number.'

Angela's throat felt too dry to use. Her brain slipped out of gear and her lower lip began to tremble. The Peace Keeper repeated its instruction, its synthesized voice like ice grating on her spinal column. A panel opened in its casing and a blaster was extruded, aimed deliberately at her heart.

'Angela Jennings,' she said. Nine/one-two/four-four.'

Something whirred within the robot's bulk. The lethal gun was, thankfully, retracted. 'Retinal-scan-confirms-identity.

You-are-warned-to-return-home-Citizen-Jennings. If-observed-outside-again-you-will-be-eradicated.'

It pivoted and left her, as if it no longer considered her of interest. She watched it go, a chill enveloping her back and shoulders. She wondered if it really had been serious about its threat. Its gun had seemed persuasive enough.

'Well,' she announced to no one in particular as she turned and headed meekly back home, 'it was a good adventure while it lasted.'

She fooled herself that things were back to normal. Back to her old world again, back to her own life. On Channel 2, *Prisoner: The Next Generation*.

'Bloody Freak!' stormed Maureen. 'She stuffed up the tunnel plan good and proper – and it was her what caused that riot and lost us our privileges.'

'Yeah, and got the screws out on strike!' said Edith. 'Can't you do something about her, Mina? My old ticker can't take much more.'

‘It’s been tried, love, over and over again, and it never works. They even got rid of the first Freak, but the Department put a clone in. They said she was “the most efficient officer we’ve had”, and they weren’t gonna lose her.’

‘So we let the mongrel get away with it? Some top dog you are!’

‘Cool it, Roo. She’ll get hers all right. We just have to plan carefully. Remember, she’s been here over two hundred years, she knows the lurks.’

‘Anyway,’ chirped Minxie, ‘we’ve got nicer things to think about. Like Patsy’s marriage to Doctor Scott for one.’

Maureen snapped her fingers in sudden recollection.

‘Strewth, yeah, and little Lucy’s gettin’ outta here tomorrow, we gotta organize a party or somethin’.’

‘Don’t know why you’re bothering,’ said Roo. ‘She’ll be back in this joint inside a week. No one stays outside for long!’

Angela slept restlessly. She dreamt about the hermit, about the people that he talked to. She wondered where he came from and her fantasies turned to other worlds and times, fantastic landscapes and sensational adventures, all hers for the taking if she dared to. But the images were shot through with blood and laser fire and burning, and the mocking voice from the television screen which told her: ‘No one stays outside for long!’

On Sunday she forgot the dreams and she didn’t think about the hermit. She wasn’t thinking at 1130 when, by force of habit, she turned to Network One again. She had missed too much of *Jubilee Towers* to catch up with the plot threads.

Helen Walker had been murdered, but no one knew by whom.

George Carstairs was involved in some computer fraud and Adam’s girlfriend Jennifer was having an affair with his brother. She didn’t even see them as characters any more, just second-rate actors trotting out poorly scripted lines for a bit of money and a taste of stardom. She was getting too old for this.

At 1435, the Watchers broke into the midday episode. It was a while since they had done that, but they remained on air for almost five minutes before the signal broke up, presumably as Peace Keepers

located and destroyed the source of the broadcast. And the broadcasters. Angela had never really taken notice before, seeing the street gang only with hatred for what they had once done to her father. Today, they made sense to her.

'The people of Torrok are vegetating, locked up in their homes, kept in line by Network programmes, told what to think and say and do.' She had to agree with that.

'People are dying, their brains disintegrating because they spend too much time in front of TVs and computers.' She bit back tears; Ruth's memory, still so recent. 'Photosensitive epilepsy', they had said. It amounted to the same thing. 'If you want to live, then join us. Switch off, get out, rise up! Switch off, get out, rise up!' He repeated the slogan over and over.

Eventually, Angela found herself mouthing it along with him.

This all made it that much harder not to think about the hermit. She continued not to do so anyway. She had promised to do the shopping today, and that would at least be a distraction. Not thinking about him, she turned to Channel 9.

Goodlife, the Domestic Channel. A well-known game show host with greasy hair and a ruddy face was extolling the virtues of porcelain penguins. It all seemed like rhetoric now.

She switched to teletext and punched in a familiar series of numbers. The screen confirmed delivery of her chosen goods in due course. A team of heavily armed couriers, who would drop a package down the mail chute and run for cover. Angela checked the family account: it had been debited already.

Without her father's income, it would be empty soon. She worried about what might happen then. She didn't think about the hermit.

She found him at the city's edge. She didn't know why she had come out here, although the darkness had at least offered cover. Her heart was loud in her ears and she was terrified of every shadow, but seeing him made the risks worthwhile.

He cut a dramatic figure, silhouetted against a half moon, a fist raised to the skies as he shouted to his invisible oppressors once again. 'I won't do it! You wanted me to cease my interfering, so I have done. I will not carry out any missions for you!'

The tirade continued, mostly repeating itself, for the next five minutes or more. Afterwards, the hermit sank to the ground, breathing hard, his face grim, looking older and more haggard than Angela had ever seen him. He had won but a temporary respite, she sensed, not an outright victory. This wasn't the moment to approach him.

She drew away from him and returned home, keeping a careful watch out for the Peace Keepers. She dreamt about him again that night, alone in the moonlight, screaming defiance to some Great Power above. What was he doing here on Torrok? What was he trying so desperately to escape from?

And who, she asked herself, might 'Time Lords' be?

Then, finally one day, she spoke to him.

He was sitting in the darkness by the filthy river, where she'd seen him many times before. She had watched once as he had expertly whittled a fallen branch into a smooth stick.

Rummaging through his pockets then, he had produced a ball of string and a hook, and within moments his creation had been complete. He sat now with that makeshift rod between his knees, dangling gently into water which could not possibly support piscine life. His fingers were laced behind his head and, with astonishing disregard for his personal safety, he appeared to have fallen asleep.

She approached him, shoes in hand, careful not to make the slightest sound to disturb his slumber. She wanted a closer look, that was all. She hovered by his side, taking in his light curly hair, his almost catlike face, softened in repose but still betraying pain and worries beyond his (admittedly indeterminate) years.

'Hello,' he said, opening one eye and smiling at her. She nearly ran, but there was something about that smile which gave her comfort. 'Early twenties, female, human. Not good so far.'

'What?'

'But black hair, not red. A definite twinkle in a pair of bright green eyes, the cutest little dimple on your cheek and a pale complexion which tells me you don't see too much sunlight.' He pulled himself into a sitting position. 'Tell me, are you a computer programmer?' Angela was nonplussed.

'Computer programming. Do you do much?'

‘Not… any more.’

‘Good.’ He patted the ground beside him and, nervously, she sat. ‘I was waiting for you to come and talk,’ he said.

‘You saw me?’

‘Off and on for the past two weeks. I don’t think you belong out here. You’re not a street thug like the Watchers.’

‘Neither are you. In fact, you’re not from Torrok at all, are you? Or from the Meson system.’

‘But that’s enough about me, let’s talk about you.’

‘I want to leave here,’ said Angela.

‘And go where?’

‘To Meson Primus.’

‘Is that better?’

‘Of course it is, they have everything. Holoscreens, VR, teleport, and they can just go outside and talk to people and…

and live!’ He had turned away, suddenly engrossed in some deep and secret thought. ‘I bet you could take me there, couldn’t you?’

‘It’s late,’ he said. ‘Go home.’

‘It’s mid-afternoon!’ The hermit gave her an inquisitive look. ‘Oh, because it’s dark, right? We go by Standard Earth Time, the twenty-four hour clock.’

‘To fit in with the other planets?’

‘To fit in with the Network, really.’

‘“The Network”?’

‘The Meson Broadcasting Service.’

‘Ah.’ He nodded. The station midway between this planet and Meson Primus.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Tell me about it.’

Angela shrugged. ‘It’s a TV station, that’s all. Sixteen channels broadcasting to all seven planets. Well, six now, since Zarnia was evacuated. Everything happens there: writing, recording, editing, everything.’

The hermit nodded. ‘That appears to be where the Time Lords wish to send me.’

‘Take me with you!’

‘I’m not going, and I couldn’t take you anyway.’ Her face fell and she could see that he had noticed. ‘I had a friend once, someone like you. I think she died because of me, I’m not sure. Whether she did or not, I let her down. It mustn’t happen again.’

‘Why should it?’

‘Because I’m an inveterate meddler. I find peril wherever I go, and I invariably endanger other people in the process.’

‘And you’re running away from a red-headed computer programmer?’

‘No! Well maybe, yes. I can’t remember, the Time Lords wiped my mind of most of it. It’s dangerous to know too much of the future.’

‘You keep mentioning these Time Lords.’

‘My own people. They tried me for my crimes and showed me myself as I am destined to become. All bitter and evil and twisted. I won’t accept that fate.’

‘So you came here.’

‘To become a recluse. To give up interfering, live a different life. To cheat my destiny.’ He looked her in the eyes, his expression grave. ‘I’ve seen my future,’ he said, ‘and I don’t wish to live in it.’

He turned away, and for a long time neither of them spoke.

Angela understood that the conversation was over. She clambered to her feet and made to leave. Then, on impulse, she paused and turned back. She offered him her hand. ‘I’m Angela.’

He took it. ‘The Doctor. I think we made a mistake today.

It's best we don't meet again.'

She left then, to go home. Perhaps to stay there until she died. She left to dream of wonders unknown, of worlds left sadly unexplored. And when, a moment later, she turned to take one last look at the hermit, he had gone. She doubted that she'd see him again.

Somehow, that made her feel very lonely.

Life continued, giving Angela no solace.

'– too far now to be stopped by a robot bunny rabbit!'

'– contestant on the *Soapbox* is 27 year-old –'

'– hospital closes over my dead body, Doctor Bob –'

'But first, another word from our sponsors:'

'– you idiot. If Adam catches us, my life is over!'

She asked her mother about the pyramid. She hadn't meant to, the question just slipped out one day and she had to pretend she had seen it on a documentary. Perhaps it was because the outside world held no attraction now. The novelty had worn off, leaving only the desolation and the danger. She had searched for the hermit twice more, but in vain. Her only hope of fresh excitement lay within that silver icon.

It was a remnant of the old days, she was told. They had found torrodium in the planet's depths and mined it, giving Torrok an economic influence it had never felt before. Seizing on the metal's amazing vibrational properties, media moguls had moved in *en masse* and the pyramid had been constructed out of a torrodium alloy within weeks. It was the first TV

station to reach the whole system, the building's apex acting as a superpowerful transmitter. For a few months, Torrok had had its own industry and its people revelled in their newfound fame and prosperity.

The Torrok Television Company had won awards for its quality and innovation. Then MBS had set their satellite up in competition, stealing sponsorship and advertising revenue with trashy shows and bigger audiences. TTC had died, taking the independence and the aspirations of an entire planet with it. They were left with nothing; less, since the Network had moved in and insidiously begun to

dominate their very lives.

Television had. deserted Torrok and had then come back to enslave it.

Angela wasn't going to let it enslave her again.

On Wednesday morning, the Peace Keepers came. They headed straight for the Doctor's hideaway, his little canvas lean-to secreted within the withered trees on the outskirts of the city. It took two of them barely ten seconds to incinerate it, fire spitting from their weapons and destroying the shelter utterly.

Angela watched and tears pricked at her eyes. She saw an image of his body, burnt and blackened in the wreckage. He would have died in terrible agony. Anguish welled inside her.

Why, when she had found something real and good, was it destroyed like this? She clenched her fists, her heart bursting with hatred. She would go down fighting, hurling herself at these oppressors in one last grand gesture of defiance.

A strong hand snatched her from the brink, another clamping over her mouth and stifling her battle-cry unborn.

Only when the Peace Keepers left did the Doctor finally release her. Tears streaked the dust on her cheeks. 'I thought you were dead in there.'

'A lot of people make the same mistake. I'm not that easy to kill.'

Angela wiped her face with her sleeve. 'I've been looking for you for days. I got here too late.'

'A moment earlier and you'd have been standing there when they arrived. What I want to know is why they turned up here at all. This area's well outside their normal search patterns, I checked that thoroughly.'

'Someone sent them?'

'Maybe.'

'These Time Lord fellows of yours?'

'I thought I told you to stay away.'

She swallowed, trying to stop the tears from flowing. 'I was lonely. My

mother... died last week.'

The Doctor's features softened. 'Sorry.'

'She went quietly, in her sleep. In front of the television.'

She looked at him. 'Take me away from here.'

He turned away. 'You know I can't.'

'I'll kill myself!'

There was a long silence. Finally, the Doctor stood. He didn't speak, he didn't look at her. He just walked away across the rubble. For a moment longer, she sat still. Then she got to her feet too and followed at a distance.

There was nothing else to do.

The Doctor's pace was brisk and his stride long, so that Angela had difficulty keeping him in sight. At least he –

wasn't trying to lose her; he had done that with far more ease, so many times before. What she couldn't work out was where he might be going. Often, she wondered if he knew the answer himself. He covered half the city in his travels, twisting and turning, changing his mind, doubling back on himself but always, at the end of it, seeming to have some direction and purpose in mind.

The box was at the far end of the city. Angela had seen it before but had given it only a cursory examination. It appeared to house a telecommunications device of some sort, a way of summoning the emergency services. As such, it belonged well in Torrok's past. It evidently meant much more than that to the Doctor, though. He patted it affectionately and scowled at the black and red paint which spelt out livid Watcher slogans over its faded blue surface. 'Switch off, get out, rise up!'

'What is it?' she asked, approaching warily.

'The TARDIS.' She looked at him blankly, so he elaborated. 'My spaceship.'

Angela tried to appear impressed. She had expected something much more grand than... than this. The Doctor caught her expression and looked offended. 'She's usually more presentable, you know.

Obviously she has been keeping some unpleasant company in recent months.' He turned back to his vessel, fumbling in his pocket for a key. Angela was so intent on seeing what lay through that paint-sprayed blue door that she failed to hear footsteps behind her.

She gasped as a leather-clad arm slipped suddenly around her throat. She could feel hot breath on her neck, and a rusty knife pressed menacingly against her cheek. 'Okay grandpa,'

snarled the gruff voice of a young male Watcher, 'get your hands in the air!'

The Doctor turned; she saw his features fall as he sized up the situation. 'Grandpa?!' he protested vigorously, but he did as he was bade, backing up against the box's door. A dozen more thugs entered the periphery of her vision; they were slinking wolf-like from the shadows, converging on these fresh victims.

The first Watcher released his grip, flinging Angela towards her companion. Another moved in hungrily, caressing her chin with his rough, grimy hand. His eyes were red and in constant motion, his breath stale and rancid. 'How ya doin', darlin'? Don't get many girls out here.'

'Get lost!'

He recoiled at the rebuff; not half far enough. 'No need to be unfriendly.' She could sense the Doctor tensing for action.

She would show him how much rescuing she needed! She brought her knee up and the youth crumpled, a groan escaping his lips. She was ready for the others, expecting them to rush her. But their leader was laughing and his expression was approving. It was as if she'd passed some form of test.

'Clicker always gets too friendly. You dealt with him right.'

'So you'll let us go?' she asked him boldly.

'Better. I'm gonna let you join us.'

'I'm afraid –' the Doctor began, but he was cut off with a glare.

'I didn't mean you, oldie!'

Angela squirmed under the boy's renewed gaze. She looked to the

Doctor, but he wouldn't meet her eye. To run free and safe on the outside, to fight against the subjugation of her people... she was sorely tempted to agree. But there was one problem.

'If he can't join,' she said, 'then neither can I.'

The leader smiled. 'Let me put this another way.' He moved closer, pushing his knife up against her face again. 'Do

– you – want – to – join – us?' He emphasized each word, his threat an implicit one.

'Best do what Scan says love,' one of the girls offered, not unkindly.

'Shut up Channel, let her answer!'

The Doctor tried to interpose himself. 'Hello?' he called, waving his hand in front of the boy's eyes. 'Wotcher!' he tried, grinning inanely at his own pun.

'What?' Scan didn't turn. The knife remained within slicing distance.

'Why can't I join?'

'You're too old, too brainwashed. Only youth holds the future.'

'And the future is?'

'Switch off, get out, rise up!' He spoke the words like a mantra. 'Our people are oppressed, locked indoors, fed televisual garbage. They should be outside, enjoying real life...'

'I agree with that.' The Doctor nodded enthusiastically.

'... fighting, killing for food, living as Man was intended to live. Survival of the fittest.'

'Ah. Well we have a basis for discussion, at least. One question: if you're so against television, why take your gang names from it?'

Scan looked at him for the first time, and Angela thought she saw his tough facade crumble just a little. 'What else is there?' he asked plaintively.

Then the moment was lost, as a clipped metal voice rapped an order to halt and the Watchers scattered instinctively. 'Go!'

yelled the Doctor, pushing Angela in one direction and hurling himself in the opposite one. The Peace Keeper moved in, repeating its instruction to those few who were listening. It shot out two wire tendrils, one entwining itself around Clicker's legs and bringing him to the ground hard. The other, to Angela's horror, found the Doctor's throat. He fell to his knees. She paused in her flight, ducking behind a half-ruined wall, crouched in an agony of indecision. A rescue attempt would be suicidal – but what might the robot do to him otherwise?

The Peace Keeper reeled its victims in, heedless of whether they could stand or not. 'State-name-and-identification-number,' it demanded of the Watcher. Sullenly he complied, and to Angela's relief, it gave him the same warning that she had once received – a long time ago now, it seemed. But then it continued: 'You-are-further-charged-with-evading-arrest.

Punishment-will-be-effected.' Electricity coursed along the wire and the boy screamed as it wracked his body, standing his hair on end and bringing him to the ground a second time.

'Leave!' the Peace Keeper ordered, retracting its grip. He did so, clambering shakily to his feet, then running as fast as his weakened legs would allow.

Angela held her breath as the robot reoriented itself towards its second captive. 'Look,' began the Doctor, holding up a pacifying hand, 'there's been a mistake. In fact, I was about to

_'

His protestations fell on deaf sensors. 'Retinal-scan-confirms-that-you-are-the-alien-called-Doctor-charged-on-November-twenty-first-with-violation-of-immigration-laws-and-instructed-to-leave-Torrok.'

'Yes, well I can explain, you see...'

The robot's gun shot from its casing. It allowed not a second's grace for its prisoner to compose himself. As Angela watched, aghast, it spat a beam of deadly fire into the Doctor's upper torso, flinging him back against a concrete wall and finally to the ground, unmoving.

It was all she could do to keep herself from screaming.

By the time the Peace Keeper was out of sight, her tears were in full flow. She didn't care if it came back now, if it caught her outside again. She wanted to be with him, to snatch one last precious moment

in his presence. She cradled his head in her lap, trying not to look at the livid wound which gaped scarlet on his chest. ‘Why did it have to happen? Why now?’

His eyes opened. ‘Melanie?’

She started, jerking back from him alarmed. He pushed away from her, springing to his feet. ‘Mel! That was her name.

Will be her name. You’re not Mel, are you?’

‘I’m Angela. You’re... alive!’

‘As I said before, Peri, I’m not so easy to kill.’ He pulled a key from his pocket and reached for the TARDIS door, wincing as the remains of his waistcoat rubbed against his skin. Alive he might well be, but Angela could see that he wasn’t well. ‘I wouldn’t like to still be here when that thing comes back though,’ he admitted. ‘It might just work out how to recalibrate its disruptor to compensate for my alien physiology.’ He pushed the door open, then hesitated and turned. She stared at him, hoping her expression of deep longing had come out right on her face.

‘It’s Angela, isn’t it?’

She nodded.

‘I suppose I wouldn’t want your suicide on my conscience.’

She blushed slightly. ‘Oh, that! Well, I didn’t... I mean I did if you’re saying... look, are you going to take me with you or not?’

‘What’s your memory like?’

‘Okay.’

‘Not photographic?’

‘I don’t think so.’

The Doctor smiled and ushered her past him. Into a new world. ‘Brilliant!’ she enthused, and hurried in before he could change his mind.

‘Just for one trip, mind!’ he called after her. He took one last look around him before following. ‘Then perhaps we can both find somewhere better to call home,’ he muttered.

The TARDIS left Torrok three minutes later, the trumpeting of its engines echoing around the otherwise silent city. Angela left her world forever, but despite the cacophony, no one noticed her departure. The Watcher gang were too far away, and the Peace Keepers had resumed their patrols. The residents were all occupied; too busy to be bothered by anything outside their windows.

It was 1130 Standard Earth Time.

Jubilee Towers was starting.

Two

ed Mantelli took a deep breath as the final numbers fli

Z ckered across the camera lens. He brushed his greasy black hair back self-consciously, and manipulated his face muscles into the patronizing smirk which had irritated viewers for three years. As the countdown reached zero, the recording light snapped on and he began his first official report as Sunlink News' Home Base Correspondent.

'Hello again, Zee-fans! Yep, it's me again, only me from half an hour ago, recording this special film insert for your viewing edification.' With affected preciseness he turned to Camera Two, hovering at eye level to his right. 'Now, if you can all tell the time – a-ha-ha-ha – you'll see the clock behind me reads 1150 SET. That means, for most of you, that you're glomming onto your fave-rave soap op, *Jubilee Towers*.

Which gives old Zed here the mega-cool opportunity to go behind the scenes of that show live, to see how we put such super-hot entertainment together for you.'

A third camera took over, bobbing ten steps ahead of Mantelli as he hurried down a sparse plastered corridor.

Camera One hurtled past his ear, very much in shot, but Three looked straight through it, virtualizing an image of the corridor behind it instead. A similar process blanked its own reflection from the mirrored sunglasses which Mantelli insisted on wearing.

'As you all know, *Jubilee Towers* doesn't use boring old studios, it films around the Network itself. So what I'm walking down now isn't any old corridor, but rather an ultra-stupendous *Jubilee* set! Hence the

trappings.' He paused by a window and Camera Three swooped in to get a close-up. It was fake, of course. On the far side, hardboard had been daubed with summer shades of green and blue. Unwisely, the painters had chosen to include a bluebird, poised in midflight in the centre of the pane.

'And at the end of this corridor, I'm told, the *Towers* team are enacting the finale of this morning's episode, the one you saw only ten minutes ago.' He gave his unseen audience a conspiratorial wink. 'That's right, Zee-fans: the bedroom scene. Let's see if we can catch them at it.'

'I don't believe it! I've spent the whole day securing a...

securing... our future, damn!' Raymond Day punched the window, then caught the glances of his fellow passengers and fell silent. Of all the times to doze off! He had gone three stops past Coronation Terrace and was halfway back where he'd started. It had taken ten minutes to find a train headed the opposite way and he was in danger of being late. More importantly, his short nap had served to worsen his hangover and his mouth felt like he had been sucking dirt.

His watch-screen message had changed from a polite set of directions to an abrupt: 'WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?' He alighted from the train, left the Loop system by anti-grav capsule and stepped into the drab corridors of the residential section. Two minutes to spare; he'd get there, just, and in the meantime they could sweat. What did they expect, giving him live scenes three miles apart?

He massaged his neck and tried to recall the script. One line, that was all, then he was out of here. At least this last scene was near his flat. He could be back in bed in five minutes. 'I don't believe it! I've spent the whole... day securing our future, and here you are cavorting with my brother behind my back! That's it, that's good.' He clutched a hand to his temple painfully.

The assistant director was hopping from foot to foot outside apartment 36D. His eyes bulged excitedly behind his thick round neon purple-framed spectacles, and the shriek of his voice was like a hacksaw across Raymond's brain. 'You're looking good today Morris,' the actor said, affecting a casual air. 'Nice crimson jacket, nice green shirt, nice purple bow-tie.

A pity none of them match.'

Ignoring that, Morris hurried him into the flat. Through an open door to his right, a young couple rolled giggling on a bed, their movements

scrutinized by flying cameras. An older man, the apartment's real life occupant, hovered watching as his bedroom was catapulted into soap history.

'Where have you been?' squeaked Morris, trying to keep his voice down. 'You're on in thirty seconds!'

'Plenty of time, then.' Raymond waved him away with a smile and tried to ignore the thumping misery of last night's excess. He went over the line again. 'I've spent the whole day...'

'Aaaaand,' slurred a horribly familiar voice behind him, 'as luck would have it, Zee-fans, we arrive to find heart-throb Ray Day, alias that mega-rad *Towers* stud, Adam Romance.'

'Mantelli! Sod off!'

'A-ha-ha-ha. But seriously...'

Raymond rounded on the presenter. 'Did you know that, every time you do that laugh, a thousand viewers kick their cats in frustration because they'd love to coil a length of barbed wire round your clammy little neck? The MSPCA should have you indicted. Better yet, hanged!'

Mantelli dried and stared into one of his attendant cameras.

The director shouted obscenities in his earpiece and he turned back to Raymond, groping for scripted questions. 'I was wondering, Ray mate, how you've coped for over twenty years with the stress of live performance in the super soapy serial?' He beamed broadly to show he was still his old cool self.

'Some days I don't know. Make it easier. Get lost!'

'Of course, you've been unable to get a job outside the *Towers*, haven't you Ray?'

'The name's "Raymond", you irritating little prat. And at least I don't have a rich father who pays for all my broadcasting work!'

'That does it, cut!' Mantelli made a slashing gesture to Camera One.

'We can't,' the director bellowed in his ear. 'We're live in five, we're not losing this sequence.'

Mantelli paled, but Raymond's first little pleasure of the day was

ruined by Morris's anguished wail: 'For Christ's sake, you're on!'

The words struck like a bolt of electricity. Raymond jerked away from the presenter, knocked the bemused flatholder out of his path and barged unceremoniously into the bedroom.

Two pairs of eyes stared at him; the actors were trying to look frightened, but they couldn't disguise their relief at his arrival.

He had forgotten the line. He drew a sharp breath, sweated in his thick lumberjack's shirt and tan syntheleather jacket beneath the cruel lighting, found no comfort in the blank looks of his colleagues and finally turned his gaze to the camera.

Two seconds to credits, it told him. Two seconds to get out that last, important speech. He looked to the male actor again.

'You – you bastard!' Raymond ad libbed. The camera beeped three times, transmission over. The couple disentangled themselves. He could hear Morris having a hysterical fit outside.

'And so folks,' Mantelli announced with obvious relish, 'it seems that, drunk and disorderly as he was, Ray Day couldn't even get his lines right today. An astonishing display of unprofessionalism, eh fans?' He leaned close to Camera Two and lowered his voice. 'Not the first time, I hear, that Paradox have had reason to doubt their star performer's aptitude.'

A strong hand gripped his shoulder. Another whipped the camera into an uncontrollable spin. By the time his director, a mile away in the Sunlink studios, had switched to One and regained his picture, Mantelli was on the ground. Blood trickled from his nose and his cracked shades lay three yards down the corridor. 'That does it,' he bleated. 'I want this film erased!'

Morris skittered agitatedly up to Raymond, who was rubbing his knuckles and wishing for a moment's respite from his headache. 'You're wanted in the producer's office...'

'Immediately. Yeah, I know the drill.' This was not turning out to be a good day.

Angela had barely moved since entering the TARDIS some ten minutes before. She stood, awe-stricken by this bright new world, and she paid little heed to the Doctor's reappearance through the interior door.

‘Well? What do you think?’

‘It’s... astounding!’

‘I meant the new waistcoat,’ he remarked archly. He was rather proud of the garment, striped with diagonal greens and oranges which didn’t quite complement any single part of his jacket. His bandaged torso was hidden beneath; the wound still hurt, but his vulnerability was no longer so obvious.

She glanced at him and wrinkled her nose. ‘Are you colour-blind?’

He forestalled his instinctive emotional eruption. She was running her hands reverently across the hexagonal console, and the wonder in her eyes tugged at his hearts.

‘This whole place, it’s... it’s –’

‘It’s bigger on the inside than the outside?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘Ten marks for observation.’

‘But how?’

The Doctor looked at her, pained. ‘Don’t you think I get sick of being asked that?’

‘And it travels anywhere in space?’

‘Right now, I doubt it will take us far. What year is it?’

’You don’t know?’

‘I know we’re nearing the end of the twenty-second century,’ he said impatiently. ‘Now when precisely? I need a baseline for my calculations.’

‘2191,’ said Angela.

The Doctor nodded and fed a stream of coordinates into the console. ‘Your colony’s come a long way in a hundred years,’

he muttered. ‘A pity it’s headed in the wrong direction.’ He drove home the last lever with a flourish and stepped back to admire his handiwork. He blinked and the readings had suddenly changed. ‘I

thought so. The Time Lords don't relish the prospect of our enjoying a few days' rest and relaxation on Florana. They'd prefer that we travel to the space station headquarters of the Meson Broadcasting Service and that we foolishly risk our lives there in their rather dubious service.'

'Suits me,' said Angela.

'Yes, I was afraid it might. Well, as I'm surplus to requirements at the moment, I may as well go and fix my hair.' He smiled at her engagingly. 'I must look my best if I'm to be on television.'

'Hi there, Zee-fans! Zed Mantelli here, your shining star of breakfast television, now coming to you live and kicking through the day here on Channel 3, Sunlink News. My job is to keep you posted on all the ultra-happening happenings on the MBS station – or, as we all like to call it here, simply "The Network". In this, my first midday broadcast, I'll be looking at the deregulated channels: are they really entertainment, or are the interfering busy-bodies of CATS talking sense for once?

A-ha-ha-ha, guess you already know I'm on your side with that one, right fans? Keep watching though, 'cos we've got Shirlene Jepson popping in later and she'll be telling us how she holds Network Four's *Brain Quiz* together, as well as talking exclusively about her brand new book, available from the shopping channel.

'But first, an apology: our advertised excursion behind the scenes of *Jubilee Towers* will not now happen 'til our first stupendous broadcast tomorrow. Get this, Zee-fans: our pre-recorded tape was eaten by the horse from *Mister Tom*. Well, that's the wacky, crazy Network world for you! Stay tuned if you want to hear more.

'And a reminder: about forty-five minutes into this show, we'll be going off air for a brief smidgeon. There's a tiny course correction planned, to take us away from Meson Beta and into the orbit of Meson Alpha. All the better to transmit our hot programmes to you, eh? Else we'd have Leena and Nostralia popping out of broadcast range and what would you do for a life then?'

'What do you mean, "suspended"?' Raymond hammered a fist onto the secretary's oaken desk.

'It means, Mr Day,' he said coldly, 'that we will not be requiring your services for the foreseeable future.'

‘Don’t play smart with me! Where’s Shepherd? Too scared to come out here and face me?’

‘You know that *Mister* Shepherd is away working on another project. However, the instructions he relayed were very specific.’

‘He can’t do this!’ Raymond was pacing the office now.

‘He’ll have people switching off in their thousands, I’m the only thing they watch his show for.’

‘You overestimate your own importance. *Jubilee Towers* is the Network’s most consistently high-rated series. I rather think the programme is bigger than any one actor, even one of your stature.’

‘And this has nothing to do with the new contract, I suppose?’

‘Of course not. Although Mr Shepherd did indicate that he might, erm, overlook past indiscretions if you…’

‘Forget it! You can churn out extra episodes all you like, but I’m not signing up for the hours and rates you’re offering!’

The secretary smiled infuriatingly. ‘Well, Mr Day. If you check your current contract, you’ll find that, should Paradox Productions have reasonable grounds to do so, we can replace you indefinitely with a hologram fashioned in your likeness.’

‘You can what?’

‘Your drinking, your lack of punctuality, your general attitude and your seeming inability to learn the simplest of scripts all constitute such “reasonable grounds”. Not to mention your disgraceful outburst on this morning’s episode, which cost the company a set fine of one hundred dollars. We will, naturally, deduct that amount from your account.’

‘Look, someone had to speak out. You’re messing with people’s lives, and the rest of the cast were too scared for their jobs to stand up to you!’

‘As should you have been, Mr Day. You will be suspended on half pay, although the considerable cost of maintaining your hologram will be deducted from that. You will also be required to vacate your apartment until such time as you are reinstated.’

‘You can’t –’

‘I’m afraid we can. Here is another copy of your new contract, as I understand you threw the old one into a waste disposal unit on live television. Get back to us when you have reconsidered your position.’

‘Stuff you!’ Raymond yelled. He ripped the document in two, thrusting it back into the younger man’s face. Then he stormed out of the office, slamming the door so hard that it took ten minutes for the secretary to put his desk back in order.

Terry Marston was sweating. He wasn’t surprised: this was no simple job at best, and this time he had the added pressure of overall responsibility. His first major task as Senior Engineer.

The first Move he had organized from the start.

He took a long, slow breath and tried to appear calm before the nervous technicians, hunched expectantly over their consoles. ‘All ready?’ he asked, keeping his voice steady with an effort.

A murmur of uneasy consensus rippled around the room, led by Jak Martyn who was a little more experienced than most. They knew what an error would mean at this stage. The Network had to shift, there was no doubt of that; such manoeuvres were essential every seven months or so, for continued broadcasting to all six planets. But the process never got easier, nor any less worrying, with experience. The station, originally quite aerodynamically designed, was now an engineering nightmare of counteracting forces and conflicting gravitic pressures. One minor miscalculation and the whole thing might overbalance, perhaps fall screaming into the heart of Meson Alpha.

Scant wonder, then, that the tension in the air was palpable as Marston sent the command to run the navigation program.

Billions of bits of information raced through the computer network, coordinating disparate processes, retracting solar panels, shutting down nonessential systems, diverting power to engineering; finally, firing solid-state propulsion units at precisely timed intervals until the satellite headquarters of the Meson Broadcasting Service began to lurch ponderously towards its new location. Throughout the process, there were readouts to be monitored, minute adjustments to be made, small anomalies to be compensated for. The slightest lapse of concentration in the next ten minutes could cause the deaths of hundreds of people.

Raymond groaned as his descent was halted. If he had remembered it was Moving Day, he would never have tried returning to the Loop. His head throbbed more than ever and something turned horribly in his stomach. He had a feeling that, by the time his one-man capsule concluded its journey, it would be in need of a mop and bucket.

On his cheap studio set, Mantelli fidgeted, anxious to restart transmission, to assure his fans he was unharmed.

Perhaps he would crack a few jokes, to prove he was still on top form, witty and urbane as ever.

In the centre of the station, a middle-aged woman fretted about her temporary loss of entertainment. She tapped her fingers and waited for her monitors to return to life.

On the TV screens of six planets, a five-word message replaced all programmes: 'NORMAL SERVICE WILL BE

RESUMED.'

Angela stifled a cry as the lights were extinguished.

'I don't believe it!' said the Doctor.

'What? What's happening?'

She could hear nothing, only her companion's laboured breathing. She had been in the TARDIS only a short time, but already she missed the hum of its busy engines. The silence unnerved her. The silence and the total, all-consuming dark.

She jumped when the Doctor finally answered. 'What's happening,' he yelled, in an explosion of anger, 'is that the Time Lords don't trust me. They're ensuring that I cannot leave here until I've done their dirty work for them. Well I shan't!' There was a heavy thud and his voice continued, calmer now and from lower down. Angela pictured him, slumped beneath the console, sulking like some petulant child.

'I intend to stay exactly where I am until they see fit to restore my mobility.'

'How long will that take?'

'A few years. A decade, if they're stubborn. You'd best suspend your bodily functions, I'll wake you when the power's back.'

‘I can’t!’

She could almost sense his eyes as they turned on her.

‘You can’t? How do you intend to pass the time then?’

‘Look, just open these doors will you? Honestly, you were ready to do what they wanted a minute ago!’

‘Before they tried to force me, yes.’ He sighed. ‘We could take a look, I suppose...’

He sounded reluctant, so Angela tried to buoy his spirits.

‘And if we’re really on the Network, we can sneak a lift to Meson Primus. It’ll be better than waiting it out here.’

There was a long, worrying silence, then she heard movement as the Doctor clambered to his feet. ‘We’ll have to be careful,’ he said. ‘Without power, we can’t use the scanner.

We won’t know what we’re walking into.’

‘I don’t care, open the doors.’

‘Again, without power...’

‘You are joking!’

‘Don’t worry, there’s a winch somewhere. You can come and help me find it.’

‘I couldn’t find my own nose at the moment.’

‘Ah,’ the Doctor said. Then, a moment later: ‘Catch!’

Angela put out her hands by instinct. Something heavy, cylindrical and rubber landed in them: the Doctor had known exactly where to pitch his throw. ‘A torch!’ She snapped on the yellow beam, locating him in its illumination. ‘Why couldn’t you have thought of that before?’

It took fifteen minutes to locate the winch handle; a further five or more for the Doctor to crank open the doors. The result, as far as Angela was concerned, was definitely not worth the wait.

‘Out of the darkness and into yet more darkness,’ she said.

‘This is not what I had in mind.’

They were in a metal-walled corridor, empty but for the incongruous police box shape of the TARDIS. Their arrival had stirred up a thick layer of grime, and tiny dust motes danced in Angela’s torch beam.

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, ‘we’ve landed either in an incredibly accurate studio reconstruction of an abandoned spaceship...’

‘Or?’

‘Or on an abandoned spaceship.’

‘We might still be on the Network,’ she said. ‘Perhaps one of the lower levels, the engine decks or something.’

‘You seem to know an awful lot about the place.’

‘I’m interested, that’s all. Seen a couple of documentaries, read a few articles...

The Doctor seemed surprised. ‘You read? That’s good. Or do you just mean teletext?’ He gave her no chance to respond.

He had already set off at a brisk march, determined to explore their new environment. Angela had little option but to follow.

A moment later, she ran into his back. ‘Look at this!’ he said, a tone of incredulity in his voice. ‘Just look at it!’ She shone her light to where he indicated, towards a silver plaque screwed tightly to the corridor wall. A shield and staser gun were depicted.

‘What is it?’

‘A corporate logo, of the Terran Security Force. An Earth organization!’ He spoke slowly and deliberately, and he didn’t seem to be addressing her. His eyes were raised upwards.

Angela pressed the point anyway.

‘Which means?’

‘That this is most definitely not the Meson Broadcasting Service station.’ Now he raised his voice to maximum and bellowed at the ceiling: ‘That those interfering incompetents on Gallifrey can’t even lay a simple course in correctly!’

Angela winced at the outburst, but his temper calmed as suddenly as it had risen. 'I wish you wouldn't keep on doing that,' she said pointedly.

'Doing what?'

'Blowing up! One minute you're all enthusiastic and exploring, the next you're sulking and pouting and the next you're screaming at the top of your voice to someone who isn't even there.'

'I am sick of being manipulated! One day the High Council are putting me on trial, the next the Celestial Intervention Agency are forcing me to run missions for them.'

'So these mood swings aren't a regular thing?'

'Remind me, why did I choose you as my companion?' He turned and walked away.

She hurried after him. 'Because you need someone to show off to?'

That seemed to hit a nerve. 'I'll have you know, young lady, that I have no such "need" of anyone. I am the cat that walks alone in the darkness, the light that shines in Evil's heart, the...'

'...vagrant who does odd jobs for the Time Lords?'

'We've been travelling together too long,' he muttered.

Terry Marston yelped and dropped the bundle of clothes onto the floor. He fumbled with his trousers, trying frantically to stuff his uncooperative legs back into them, terrified of what might happen to those legs if he was caught here.

'All this time,' thundered Raymond Day's voice from behind the door, 'you've been playing around behind my back.

I knew it, I should have seen the signs. Let me at the little runt!'

He abandoned his attempts at dressing. He caught his own reflection, white and shaking in the mirror. Fifty- four years old; he wasn't ready to die. What was he doing anyway? How did a scrawny, grey-haired wimp like him end up in... *her* bathroom?

'Can't hide, pal – you messed with my girlfriend, I'll mess with your face!'

He dived beneath the wash basin, covering his head to ward off the blows which were doubtless coming his way. He nearly screamed when the door opened.

'Oh Terry, have you not finished yet? We haven't long, you know.' The full body of Mae Jordan stood in the doorway, hands on hips, an expression of mild irritation on her face. A tissue-thin negligée left nothing to the imagination and Marston wanted this less than ever.

He scrambled to his feet, trying to recover his composure.

'I thought I... I mean, your fiancé, I heard...'

Mae tossed back her thick auburn hair and laughed uproariously. 'It's 1430, you idiot. I put *Jubilee Towers* on!'

She stepped back and he could see the television set in the bedroom behind her. 'So long as he's live on that, there's no chance of him coming back here.'

Sweat pricked cold on Marston's forehead. All in all, he had been more confident about moving the station an hour before. At least that had been familiar territory. This... well, this was something entirely new. He had been completely unprepared for Mae's advances (which had started, so everyone had pointed out, immediately after his promotion) and he had to confess that he found them flattering, no matter what was said about her in the refectory and on the convenience walls. Mae Jordan was all woman, a well-known if not particularly prolific actress and one of those people who just seemed so much larger than life. No matter how awkward and clumsy he'd been in their first conversational exchanges, she had laughed along with him and made him feel like he existed for once.

A fortnight later, it had come to this and he hadn't known how he could stop it. Mae grabbed his hand and dragged him unceremoniously through the door. He found that he was still shaking, but for different reasons now. 'Can we have that thing turned off?' he stalled, nodding towards the television.

'It's... distracting.'

Adam Romance had confronted his fiancé's illicit lover and was proceeding to assault him with a baseball bat.

'Of course not, silly.' She put a surprisingly delicate finger to his lips. 'We need to keep an eye on it. If Raymond goes off screen for more

than five minutes, you'll have to run.' He swallowed. 'Don't worry, he's in a big storyline, they'll probably need him all through this episode.'

She gripped his head and turned it from the set (and, incidentally, from a flying camera, hovering near the ceiling).

She pulled him down onto the bed and encircled him tightly with her tree-trunk limbs. The smell of perfume was overpowering.

Neither party then paid much attention to the programme.

They didn't see that Adam's blows landed a short distance from their intended recipient, nor that his body flickered slightly every three seconds, the effect of a minor glitch in the hologram production program.

They weren't quite as safe as they imagined.

'I want to see the Programme Controller!'

Giselle feigned surprise at Raymond's sudden arrival. 'I'm sorry, he's unavailable. Can I help you?'

'You can feed Dom Shepherd into a waste disposal unit.'

'Oh dear. Problems with the producer?'

Raymond dropped into a leather armchair facing her desk.

'Do you know what he's done?' Giselle did, but she pretended ignorance. 'He's not even on the station. He's off on some secret project and jerking my life about by remote control!'

Giselle actually quite liked Raymond Day. She had even been a fan once, when they had both started working here in the Network's earliest days. He was in his forties now, a few years younger than her, and the stresses of an actor's life were showing. His dark hair sprung from grey roots and his eyes had lost the sparkle they once held, but he was still handsome in a rugged kind of way. She couldn't help but feel traces of that girlish admiration she had thought long past, and she had helped Raymond more than most. Of course she had stabbed him in the back too, but he didn't know that.

'I saw my agent, but there's nothing he could do. It's all in some restrictive clause I agreed to twenty-one years ago. Plus I'm still

technically signed to Paradox so I can't get another job.'

'And you can't find someone to buy out your contract? Say, for an exclusive interview about the whole thing?'

Raymond shook his head. 'I've had my agent asking around for an hour. Everyone wants me, no one wants to pay.

All money, as usual.'

'I understand your problem,' said Giselle, 'but I doubt if the Programme Controller can help.'

'He knows I'm good for ratings, he could do something!'

'I'm afraid, since Paradox bought *Jubilee Towers*, we have no jurisdiction over it. They're an independent company, who simply lease space and production facilities from us.'

'So you're not prepared to do anything?'

'I am simply saying that the Programme Controller will be unable to act officially.' Giselle gave him a significant look, one which Raymond, in the past two decades, had learnt to understand. He leaned forward in anticipation.

'What have you got in mind?'

She told him. She told him how to get back at Shepherd and earn some essential publicity into the bargain. 'Enough of a story,' she said, 'so that every company on this station will be begging to buy that contract at whatever price you set.'

'What do I do?'

'You don't do anything. I'll set it up from here while you find an alibi. Go home and take that lovely fiancé of yours to dinner somewhere public. Then watch this evening's instalment of *Jubilee Towers* and prepare your agent for an onslaught of calls.'

That only left the question of remuneration, and Raymond was so glad of the lifeline Giselle was throwing him that he accepted the first price quoted. He exited the office in considerably higher spirits than he had entered it, and Giselle watched him leave with a contemplative expression.

Ordinarily she wouldn't have been so forthright in her dealings, but

Raymond had lived here a long time, he knew how things worked; knew that she was in control.

She flicked a switch and the bank of sixteen screens behind her resumed their default settings. Throughout the actor's visit they had monitored the station's output, as they routinely did when anyone invaded her sanctum. Now they received something far more engaging. Live transmissions, from cameras the station over. Giselle's one constant source of entertainment, and not only that. On *her* Network, such recreation was pro-active.

She had listened once to a conversation in which Anson Hammond had compared her to a spider. She lurked, the Security Chief had claimed, in the centre of a tangled web of politics and power relations, and every so often she would draw an unsuspecting innocent into her clutches. She liked the metaphor. And she delighted in pulling those gossamer threads, bringing two forces into confluence, perhaps toppling one from its perch on a mere whim.

In Raymond Day's flat, his fiancé was frolicking with an ageing and somewhat embarrassed engineer. Giselle hoped that he would heed her advice. If he went straight home, then her day would have been worthwhile.

At last, the Doctor had been able to restore some power.

Angela's heart leapt as the lights came on and she saw her surroundings properly for the first time.

The ship's bridge was not at all as glamorous or futuristic as that of the TARDIS. It was battered and dirty, in fact, designed with a mind for functional qualities over aesthetic ones. It was, none the less, exactly where Angela had wanted to be all her life. A real, solid bridge on a real, solid- starship, with all the myriad possibilities for travel and adventure that such a location entailed.

'Should keep us going for a few hours,' the Doctor murmured, emerging from beneath a tatty console. 'A slight computer fault, that's all.'

'Does that mean we can operate the viewscreen?'

The Doctor grinned. 'It certainly does.' He located the correct lever in seconds, and Angela gasped as a set of stone shutters parted on the concave wall before her, revealing the stunning vista of outer space. And one other thing, equally as thrilling.

‘Did someone actually design that?’ the Doctor scoffed, spoiling the moment. ‘It looks more like it was bolted together in stages.’

He had a point. The Meson Broadcasting Service had once occupied a nice, small, spherical station. Two decades, a number of hostile take-overs and a dozen haphazard extensions later, it was hard to see that original neat design through the sprawling mess of tubes, cubes and other, irregular, shapes which comprised the Network of 2191.

‘We’ve ended up near it at least,’ said Angela brightly.

‘Perhaps the Time Lords didn’t realize it was moving today.’

‘I’m surprised it can,’ the Doctor said. ‘You’d think that one good thrust of the engines would split the whole thing into three. For that matter, I wonder how this vessel got so far from Earth without anyone on board?’ He operated the controls again, and the image of the station faded. Angela flinched as the irksome features of Zed Manteili replaced it.

‘Now coming up to 1445, Zee-fans, and I’m here to remind you that the lines are still open for my mega- splendorous evening show at 1900. Today’s topic is *Life’s a Beach*, and should Sophie marry Bradley or Hank? Get your vote in now, dudes, or they might decide without you.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘I see the broadcast content’s little better. Do they put him on there often?’

‘All the time,’ said Angela, distastefully. ‘Turn to One, *Jubilee Towers* must’ve started.’ She caught the Doctor’s disapproving expression and wished she hadn’t spoken.

‘Maybe that’s why the Time Lords sent us here instead of directly to the station,’ he mused. ‘Perhaps this ship’s got torpedoes we can use, to shut this “Network” down and put its viewers out of their misery.’

‘Do you really not know what the Time Lords want?’

‘The more they brief me, the less chance of being able to deny their involvement later.’ The Doctor’s hands were flitting with inhuman speed across a series of control pads. ‘I’m going to have to teleport there and find out what’s happening the hard way.’

Angela’s hackles rose at his use of the singular pronoun.

‘Not without me!’ she objected.

‘I’m afraid, my dear girl, that the teleport device is a primitive one. I need someone to stay behind and operate it.’

‘Or you’re trying to get rid of me,’ she accused him. ‘You never wanted me with you. You wouldn’t have cared if I had killed myself!’

Angela had noted, from their first meeting, the changeability of the Doctor’s demeanour. However, this was the first time she had seen such affection in his look and such a genuine sense of loss behind it. ‘In the short time we have known each other, I have come to care about you very much indeed.’ She blushed, and chose to make no further protest.

Then, as suddenly, he was back to his old brusque self, rapping out instructions as he plucked a hand-held radio-like device from one wall – a recall unit, apparently. ‘Soonest started...’ he called to her, hurrying onto the raised this that served as the ship’s telepad. He winked as she operated the controls, as she sent him fading slowly back out of her life, perhaps for the last time.

To her amusement, he appeared on the screen, interrupting Mantelli in full flow. The startled presenter tried to rise to the occasion, to say something witty and appropriate. All he managed was a strangulated cry of ‘Where did you come from?’

‘Oh, I’m merely a concerned citizen,’ the Doctor assured him airily, ‘and I wanted to tell you how much I truly, sincerely believe that Sophie should marry Hank.’

Angela chuckled and sat in one of the control chairs. She imagined herself captaining a beauty like this, exploring final frontiers (or however that old cliché went) and forging new paths through an unfamiliar universe. The dream felt good.

For once, it even felt attainable.

Then the lights went out again and she heard scratching, metal upon metal, as if something was slithering across the ship’s hull.

She wasn’t alone.

Another wave of nausea hit Raymond as he arrived home. It was prompted by the short, pudgy man who met him at the doorway and told him that, as a duly authorized representative of Network Estates,

he was here to take possession of the flat.

Raymond told him where he could stick his authorization and when the man threatened to call Security, he grabbed his laser pistol from its drawer. The agent retreated, but not without a parting shot: 'I warned you, sir. On your own head be it.'

Raymond fired the gun, deliberately high, and he leapt whimpering down the corridor.

What Raymond needed was a drink, some hair of the dog to put his brain straight. He switched on the TV and almost kicked the screen in at the sight of his own holographic image on the midday edition of *Jubilee Towers*. No, that would be stupid! His head was hurting again. He could hear giggling from the bedroom.

Not Mae. Not again. His stomach churned, his heart sinking. He was imagining it, spent too long in that damn soap opera, saw improbable plot twists everywhere. Real life wasn't like that. He didn't need any more aggravation.

He pushed the door open, the pistol still gripped in his hand. The world ran in slow-motion and black and white with a faint red wash. Terry Marston screamed convulsively and tried to hide himself beneath the sheets. Mae groaned and rolled her eyes. Pain knifed through Raymond's head again, an overwhelming tide of frustration welling thickly in his chest and shoulders and the world was slipping into soft focus. He felt like he was somewhere else, watching this, not feeling this.

'I don't believe it! I've spent the whole day securing our future, and here you are cavorting with my brother behind my back!'

'Don't be silly,' said Mae crossly, 'you haven't got a brother.'

'I know.' His finger tightened on the trigger.

He shot Marston through the head.

Three

he shuttlebus left Nostralia at 1400 SET. The journey, for its

T five hundred passengers, was not a pleasant one. The archaic Mark HI personnel carrier was cramped and dirty. The in-flight meal tasted

of plastic and the entertainment was abysmal. The entertainment, actually, was a cross-section of the Network's current output, although in deference to younger travellers, the stewards avoided the four deregulated channels. Sun-link, likewise, was meticulously shunned: nothing could kill the party atmosphere faster than the sight of Zed Mantelli.

Lucinda sat tensely through the ninety minutes of the trip, her plastic bag huddled tight against her chest. She had chosen an innocuous one from her local supermarket, and had painstakingly checked it for transparency. She couldn't risk its contents being glimpsed.

'Averse to spending money, aren't they?' Roderick said in his nasal whine. 'The seats are designed to cause maximum discomfort and the film is four years and four channels out of date.'

The 'Welcome' video had begun, its 'magnificent MegaVision™ effects' dulled by Network Tours' reluctance to invest in the necessary holoscreen. 'The brief of the Meson Broadcasting Service is to advise, amuse and enlighten,' spoke the narrator's honeyed voice over a distorted two-dimensional image of the station. 'Our initial seven channels have done that for almost seventeen years, creating such hit programmes as *Brain Quiz*, *Perfect Partners*, *Private Hospital* and the number one show systemwide, *Jubilee Towers*.'

'Which they ruined by selling it to Paradox,' Lucinda snorted.

The screen showed a young Raymond Day acting out his first *Towers* marriage. 'Ahh, vintage stuff. But we've plenty of exciting new ideas too. Since deregulation, we offer a more stunning array of choice than ever. Wolf Broadcasting run Channel 10 for us, and we know how you love them. For the kids, we also have Zounds!, the all-day music channel, whilst Mum and Dad can sit back and watch Option-8 or the newly acquired Black Sun station on 12. Ooh, naughty!' Various scantily-clad forms jigged across the screen, black

'CENSORED' tags keeping pace. 'And for your necessities: well, shopping's never been easier. Tune to Channel 9, Goodlife, and have your comestibles sent straight to your home... which leaves more time for television viewing!'

There was plenty more, all self-congratulatory and containing no new information. Still, the film helped build on the air of determined anticipation; getting tour tickets wasn't easy, particularly off Meson Primus, and many passengers had waited months for this.

‘They deliberately trivialized the immodest channels,’ said Roderick. ‘I suppose they wish to deflect controversy.’

Lucinda nodded politely, aware that the rest of the group were pretending not to have heard. Behind her, Mike and Colin sat apart from the others and discussed the current storylines of *Life’s a Beach*. Encouraged by Ged, Richard was lusting over a young man across the aisle, whilst George shrank away in embarrassment and complained of a migraine.

Mary was finding it all hilarious.

A steward glanced in their direction. Lucinda looked away guiltily and buried the bag in the folds of her arms.

The film had finished; they were on their final approach.

Soon, no one would be able to ignore their demands.

From the Network’s centre, Giselle saw everything. Not the programmes, of course. Real life was better! She had cheered as Raymond Day killed Terry Marston, and she watched him now, lolling in a disbelieving stupor on his couch. When it appeared that nothing more would happen for a while, she called the estate agent and reminded him how urgently Raymond’s flat was needed. She also arranged for Network One’s continuity announcer to be out of his booth at 1750.

Then she checked the Programme Controller’s appointments and saw that Miriam Walker, chairperson of CATS, was due to see him in ten minutes.

She called Firn Kaerson, executing the masking subroutine which made her look and sound, to his comlink, like her boss.

‘I’m sorry Firn, but this meeting’s taking longer than I thought. Could you see to Mrs Walker for me, there’s a good chap?’

She sat back, keeping one eye on her monitors lest she miss something. She caught her own reflection in one screen and adjusted her hair accordingly. Her image was important. She was thought of as the perfect executive and she worked hard to maintain that misconception. She wore her hair in a bun and balanced unnecessary metal-rimmed spectacles on her hawkish nose. Her wardrobe consisted solely of prim business suits, high heels and skirts she could barely walk in.

Zed Mantelli appeared on fourteen, complaining that he couldn't get his 'mega-hot' programme out if people wouldn't cooperate. Even Giselle couldn't stand watching him for long, so she switched that screen to Kaerson's office instead. Not that she expected Miriam Walker to say anything new.

Raymond was on his feet and talking agitatedly to his fiancé. She tuned her headset into monitor five and donned it.

The spacious goggles wrapped comfortably about her glasses as the miracles of VRTV thrust her invisibly into the action.

'– believe you've done this! I thought we'd sorted it out, I thought you wouldn't, not again.' Mae rolled her eyes, unimpressed. 'You made me kill him, I was ready to marry you and everything, I'd have changed the surname if you'd really... God, I can't take this in.' He screwed his eyes up, tumbled back onto the sofa and was up again a moment later, screaming: 'What the hell is that thing doing there?'

Mae glanced up at the camera, bobbing innocently over the doorway. 'It's been here months, you must have noticed.'

'I'm being filmed, oh hell, I'm being filmed. That's all the evidence they'll need, the fine for this'll ruin me!' He grabbed Mae's arm and pulled her roughly to the bedroom. She shook him off indignantly.

'You're not taking me in there, there's a corpse on the bed.'

'Don't say that in front of the camera!'

'There's one in the bedroom anyway.'

'What?'

'So sue me, I was making a video. Work's slow.' Raymond was already through the door, using the bed as a springboard to launch himself at the incriminating device. 'Don't worry, those things are in everyone's rooms. The chances of someone watching that one as you blew –'

'Shut up!' he yelled, striding back in and hurling the captured camera across the room. His hands began to shake and he looked to her imploringly. 'What's happening to me?

My life's becoming more complicated than Adam Romance's.' Someone hammered on the outer door. 'Don't get that, it's probably the vicar!'

‘Go into the bedroom,’ she ordered. ‘You don’t want to see anyone in your state.’ He hesitated, then nodded and retreated.

‘And do something about Terry!’ Mae shouted after him. She crossed to the door and opened it.

Four large security officers burst into the apartment.

It took a while for Angela to realize what the latest power outage meant. No power, no teleport. No teleport, no Doctor.

She was stranded, with as much chance of escaping as she’d had of leaving Torrok before he had saved her.

She remembered her torch and shone it disconsolately over the tangle of wires on which he had worked. She didn’t relish the idea of trying to copy his feat of engineering: the nearest she had got to repair work was watching *DIY Disasters* on Wolf-2.

She waited, in the vain hope that he would find some way of returning. For half an hour or more, she paced and fidgeted and counted off the seconds in her head. Then she heard the sounds again, banging and scraping, and she knew with an awful certainty that she hadn’t simply imagined them before.

She was running before she knew it; not quite a voluntary action, more a reflex, a frenzied dash for the safety of the Doctor’s ship. His dead ship, she reminded herself, no light or warmth or comfort but at least some security, an extra door to separate her from... what?

The torch light bobbed along the floor, endless identical corridors, giving no clue as to which path to take. She screamed as its yellow beam suddenly glanced off chrome. A mechanoid, humanoid but composed of box shapes, its function betrayed by the black SECURITY tag across its chest. It had approached in silence; in silence also, it crossed the distance between them, its speed alarming, its arms flailing and missing her by inches as she propelled herself backwards in terror. She lost her footing, fell, scrambled to her feet, turned to run and saw another of the droids blocking the corridor behind her.

Something clanged, but it came from outside. She begged them as she pressed against the wall. They stopped, and she closed her eyes and cried.

She saw her mother in the dreadful peace of that extended moment, perhaps now waking alone with the TV. She wished she hadn’t lied

about her to the Doctor. Waking, watching, discovering her daughter's absence. Waiting for the news to come, would it be the Watchers or the Peace Keepers?

Or something else?

Her captors didn't move. She stared through water-misted eyes. The wall vibrated against her back; she tried to pull away from it, but too late. She felt a sharp pain in her neck and she was riveted to the spot.

Then something cold and metal drilled into the back of her head and she knew no more for a time.

The ship was one hundred kilometres from the station and approaching.

The Doctor had been here for thirty minutes, but had accomplished nothing. The station from the inside was every bit as complex and misordered as its outer appearance indicated, and whilst he had located Adam Romance's bachelor pad and wandered inadvertently onto the set of a lightweight afternoon quiz show, he was no nearer to finding anyone in authority.

He was also feeling guilty about the lie he'd told to Angela.

The ship's teleporter may well have been primitive, but it would have been the work of moments to manufacture a remote link for it. The truth was, he'd been scared. He had thought of the Valeyard, his own future self, and of the accusations he had made: 'The Doctor's companions have been placed in danger twice as often as the Doctor.' He remembered Peri, let down by him so badly. But the Network didn't seem so perilous and besides, Angela knew it better than he did.

He fished the recall unit from his pocket. He was going back to fetch her. Then booted footsteps approached, a voice yelled for him to halt and an over-zealous trigger finger sent a blaster bolt sizzling past his shoulder. By force of habit almost, he ran. The security officer followed.

This was not the meeting with authority he'd envisaged.

Lucinda frowned as a garishly clad stranger skidded round a corner and threw himself into the middle of the tour crowd.

Was this some sort of stunt?

‘If you all keep still a moment,’ someone was shouting, ‘we can section you into smaller groups and begin your tour.’

‘“Smaller groups” meaning seventy to eighty of us,’ droned Roderick. ‘The Network’s ruthless drive for financial efficiency has left no room whatsoever for the personal touch.’

Mary giggled at the words ‘personal touch’. Ged and Richard swapped obscene food jokes and howled at each other’s humour. Colin and Mike had wandered off to look at a display case full of *Private Hospital* costumes.

‘We must keep together,’ said Lucinda. we’re split up, we’ve had it.’ The first group was already being led away by two brightly dressed guides. Mary laughed again at the words

‘had it’.

‘Are those two hooligans with you?’ an irate woman challenged George. He shook his head quickly. Ged and Richard had reached the Lucinda/ *Cricklestone’s Mummy* comparisons and were falling about.

It was no thanks to any of them, she thought bitterly, that they did finally end up together. She noted too that the multi-coloured stranger was in their group, keeping to the centre and looking about him with exaggerated interest. They were herded down a long dark corridor, their guide issuing forth some spiel about rehearsal rooms. Then suddenly, the group halted and a gasp of amazement swept from its front to its rear. Lucinda craned to see over the taller people in front of her.

‘Xyrons!’ George whispered.

The crowd parted as two sleek, metallic humanoids pushed through. Well, ‘humanoids’ wasn’t quite accurate. They had no arms and their torsos seemed unconnected somehow, as if someone had wrapped segmented steel tubes around their spinal columns. The important thing, the crowd realized, was that these weren’t men in costumes. They were robots.

Familiar ones, to some.

The Xyrons halted, their featureless heads turning slowly is if scanning the visitors. As one, they lashed out viciously, the tubes cracking out like whips, wrapping around one person each in seconds. The victims were reeled in, held tight against hard metal, then carried silently

away. One screamed, banging vainly on his captor's head. The other laughed and pulled faces, showing off for the benefit of his friends. Lucinda frowned. Their guides seemed as stunned as anyone: was the joke on them too? She watched as one slipped away after the kidnappers. She was not surprised when the colourful man followed.

'Some stunt,' a woman said.

'I almost thought they were real.'

'Erm... the Xyrons from *Timeriders*, everyone,' the remaining guide announced.

The group was milling and laughing and talking. Her own people, miraculously, were still together. There was only one woman left to watch them. 'Let's go,' she said, and they shuffled towards a side corridor.

Roderick hadn't heard. 'You see, the tragedy of the Xyrons,' he was saying to a complete stranger, 'is that they were once as human as you or I. Their minds were transferred into artificial vessels and they steal the bodies of others in the hope of one day reversing that process. They're actually a terrific satirization of the importance we attach to outside appearances, and in some stories they were used as a political allegory on the way our society views disabled people.'

'What on earth did you think you were doing?' Lucinda asked as she dragged him away.

'Well he said they were just "mean metal bastards"!' said Roderick.

Hammond looked her four men up and down. Their black tunics were immaculate, down to Brookes's conspicuous cufflinks. Their captive, on the other hand, had a split lip and a nose dripping with blood. His legs trembled in the aftermath of an adrenalin rush and although he tried to return her iron gaze, his swollen eye made that impossible.

'We were asked to perform an eviction,' Brookes said. 'Mr Day reacted violently and was subdued.'

'I wrapped my face around their feet,' said Raymond. He winced as the fierce grip on his arm tightened.

'You might at least have made it look good,' Hammond said bitterly. Brookes shrugged. His chestnut brown moustache twitched and she caught a glimpse of unevenly spaced teeth as he strained not to smile.

‘All right then, put him in a holding cell ’til he cools off.’ Three officers obeyed, herding the unresisting actor away. On a signal from Hammond, Brookes stayed behind.

‘What do you think your brains are for, Dan?’

‘Ma’am?’

‘Well Raymond Day, of all people. You might as well perform celebrity beatings on Channel 1 if you’re going to be so unsubtle.’ He didn’t reply, obviously unconcerned. ‘Oh, get out of my office, go on!’

Brookes hesitated at the door. ‘Just wondering about the intruder, ma’am?’ She gave him a blank look. ‘You know, him with the patchwork coat and the yellow pants? Teleported straight into a Mantelli link, don’t tell me you didn’t know?’

‘You don’t seriously think I’d watch Mantelli!’

‘I think he’s rather good, ma’am.’

‘Okay Brookes, leave!’ This time, he did as he was bidden.

Hammond punched her desk frustratedly. ‘No one tells me anything!’ The remark was addressed towards her friend in the corner. It kept an uncharacteristic silence.

The Doctor came to a halt, resignedly. The tour crowd had delayed him too long and the station’s chaotic layout had only confounded him further. The Xyrons were gone. But suddenly, half a dozen people were hurrying towards him.

He made to run, but these were no security guards. Rather, their entourage of flying cameras told him that filming was in progress. ‘We’re trying to organize a pantomime,’ the group’s front-runner said, breathlessly. ‘Have you seen a purple horse with yellow spots?’

‘Not since the last Intergalactic Peace Conference.’

‘Thanks anyway.’ She brushed back her long blonde hair and led the procession off again. The Doctor shook his head, then dug the recall unit out again and stared at it.

The kidnapping had worried him; perhaps things weren’t as safe here as he’d thought. But he was getting nowhere on his own, and Angela would be worrying about him too. Perhaps if he warned her, ensured

that she acted with caution... could things return to normal for him, at last?

He made his decision and operated the device. He was still trying to work out why nothing had happened when another security officer shot at him.

Firn Kaerson rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn. ‘I’m sorry,’

he lied as his visitor glared at him. ‘Hard day. Go on.’

The last thing he had needed was a meeting with Miriam Walker. The woman had filed complaint after complaint, from Raymond Day’s *Jubilee Towers* outburst to a poor taste cat joke on *Suburban Chuckles*. She had brought her personal assistant with her: six-foot four Glynda, with the blonde hair and the tremendous body, who sat demurely by her side and scribbled dutifully in a notebook. Mrs Walker had accused Kaerson of ignoring her three times, and how could he answer that? ‘I’m sorry, but whenever I make eye contact, your assistant’s chest distracts me.’ Not likely. She might look sweet and frail, but he knew that Miriam Walker wielded a pretty mean umbrella. At the suggestion of lustful thoughts, she was likely to pummel him to death with it.

‘Now the next thing on my agenda,’ she said, ‘is these deregulated channels of yours, Option-8 and its puerile imitators. Why haven’t you banned them yet?’

‘We’re still looking into that. If you would like a complaint reminder form –’

‘I would not! Those channels are a disgrace, and as the appointed representative of the Campaign for the Advancement of Television Standards, I will not leave this station until they’re stopped!’

Glynda looked up from her note-taking. ‘Well said, Mrs Walker.’

‘Madam, the Programme Controller –’

‘Has avoided me on my past seven visits to this station. I assume he simply cannot answer my arguments.’

‘If you took another appointment form, I’m sure –’

‘I am not interested in your forms, Mr Kaerson. You have had enough paperwork from me in the past thirteen years to make a small

encyclopedia. What I am concerned with is the moral and spiritual upbringing of our children.'

'We broadcast sixteen channels,' said Kaerson wearily.

'Only four choose not to conform with internal guidelines and for those, a separate access card is needed.'

'Not good enough! I –'

The office door crashed abruptly open. 'Sorry to interrupt,'

said the man who hurtled across the threshold, 'but your plaque says "Deputy Programme Controller" and I need someone to call off –'

'Excuse me!' Mrs Walker snapped. 'We're in the middle of an important meeting.'

'Oh?'

She got to her feet, eyeing the new arrival with ill-concealed distaste. His gaudy jacket did not fit her idea of acceptable dress codes. 'I expect you're one of those

"trendies" who don't care what is being pumped into the minds of the weak and impressionable.'

He stared at her, then sighed and nodded as he digested her meaning. 'I admire your tenacity madam, but the television effects debate has lasted over two centuries and I don't have time to stand here while you attempt to resolve it.'

'You, young man, have been watching too much *Abbeydale High* to learn such disrespect for your elders.' The stranger winced as Mrs Walker jabbed the sharp point of her umbrella into his chest.

'And you've been watching too much *Zorro*!' he said indignantly.

The door flew open again. This time, Dan Brookes barged into the room. The stranger unchivalrously pushed Mrs Walker into his path, taking refuge behind Kaerson's desk.

'I'm sorry sir, but this man is an intruder.' Brookes levelled his standard-issue blaster rifle at his quarry. 'I'm taking him in.'

The stranger looked towards Firn Kaerson, a plea in his eyes. Kaerson turned from one to another of his visitors, his gaze lingering longest

on Glynda. ‘The gentleman is with me,’

he said at length. ‘Perhaps you could see Mrs Walker and her friend to their shuttle?’

Brookes’s anger was visible only in his eyes, and in the angry pulsing of a neck muscle. Miriam Walker’s feelings were more succinctly expressed. ‘We are not leaving yet!’

‘Get out!’ Brookes screamed, glad of this fresh target for his ire. With a token mumbled protest, she obeyed, her assistant scuttling after her, concerned. The stranger waved cheerfully as Brookes followed. Then he dropped into a chair and Kaerson pushed a sheaf of papers in front of him.

‘Fill these in before he comes back.’

‘But I can’t stand paperwork!’

‘Then you’ll have to leave.’

‘Can you tell me something first?’

Kaerson placed another sheet atop the pile. ‘Appointment form. Backdate it, in case that gorilla checks what I told him.’

‘Why did you say that, anyway?’

‘You arrived at an opportune moment. Besides, I don’t like Brookes very much.’

‘The feeling’s mutual. I’m the Doctor, by the way.’ He hefted the documents and dropped them neatly into a cylindrical bin. ‘Now I tell you what I’ll do: I won’t fill in your forms, so I won’t officially be here. So you don’t have to record the minutes of this meeting or issue a visa or anything else you’d otherwise feel you have to do, and we can all spend that little bit more time on our real jobs.’

‘But that’s –’

‘Entirely against your regulations, I’m sure. We’ll give the station ten minutes to disintegrate and if not, let’s risk it, eh?’

Kaerson shook his head. ‘Perhaps this once…’ His eyes were hurting and he needed a stimulant. ‘Some coffee?’

‘By all means,’ said the Doctor. ‘Pass the hot beverage requisition

docket.'

'I said "excuse me", young man,' said Miriam Walker, her umbrella thrust hard into the security officer's back.

Brookes snarled and pulled away from the door. 'I wish to be taken to the Programme Controller now.'

'Get back to your cauldron!' Brookes snapped, before returning to his eavesdropping.

Mrs Walker almost fainted. 'Take that officer's number, Glynda.'

'He doesn't have one, Mrs Walker.'

She grabbed his shoulder and waved the umbrella under his nose. 'I'll remember your face, you young scamp. Come on, Glynda.' She pivoted and left, the younger woman trailing behind. 'You see now what *Life's a Beach* causes, dear.

Appalling manners!'

Brookes's comlink signalled an incoming message. It was Security Chief Hammond. 'Don't do anything, we're coming.'

'"We", ma'am?'

'I said "I". I'm on my way there and I'll deal with the weird fellow myself.'

Giselle sighed, disappointed. This 'Doctor' looked interesting, but Kaerson's drinks dispenser was delivering silt and water, and damage reports had to be filed. Despite his visitor's protestations, he would have to save his questions.

Strange how many things were malfunctioning today: Xyrons, holograms, now vending machines. Even one of her monitors was down. She prayed she wouldn't miss any action.

She accepted a message from the engine decks. The square, unshaven face of Jak Martyn appeared in painfully low 625-line resolution on her computer screen. Giselle knew him only vaguely; his sister had betrayed her once and died for it. 'I wondered if you might know where Terry Marston is,' he said, the concern in his voice alerting her to the fact that this was no casual enquiry.

'What's wrong?'

‘There’s a ship – a derelict, drifting towards us. It might hit the transmitters.’

‘You mean you moved into its path?’

‘We didn’t see it before, it must have been cloaked.’

‘You said it was derelict!’

‘There are no life signs, but –’

‘Look, I don’t know where Marston is, so why don’t you see what you can work out yourself?’ She smiled sweetly and cut the link. She could do without such technicalities.

She checked the day’s arrivals and departures. The computer sorted the files, patching the relevant excerpts through to her headset. Executives came and went on business, but she wasn’t interested. Miriam Walker’s personal shuttle docked and she and Glynda disembarked. ‘We need to sack that chauffeur,’ the older woman said. ‘Three episodes of *Shipwise* and he’s flying like a lunatic.’

Next, she was mingling with the Nostralian tour group as they left their bus. The clip ended as the Doctor joined the crowd, but Giselle mentally commanded the computer to continue. This enabled her to watch the Xyron incident, which she had only heard about before. Then a group of teenagers slipped away from the others and she placed a trace on them for future reference.

At last, the extract she’d been waiting for. She watched Mantelli’s broadcast unseen, and jumped startled as the stranger appeared from nowhere. She chuckled at the way he unbalanced the ebullient presenter, then she removed her headset thoughtfully. Well, it made some sort of sense! She would have been surprised had this Doctor travelled here by normal means.

She was determined to find out more.

‘I’m tired of this,’ said Colin. ‘We’ve been going round in circles for the past half hour.’

‘Well don’t blame me,’ said Lucinda. ‘This map George got is useless, it’s all out of date.’ The *Indispensable Network Guide* had been a cheap profit maker, marketed planetside a few years earlier. Even then it had been inaccurate. The compilers had chosen to present an ordered image of the station, and had accordingly rejigged its layout to fit into

a perfect circle.

‘Why don’t we go back to the tour?’ suggested Mike.

‘We have been at it for a long time,’ said Mary. Then she gasped in mock alarm and chuckled at her own weak *double entendre*.

Lucinda tried to re-establish order. ‘Look, this corridor’s familiar, I’m sure they use it on *Jubilee Towers* or something.

So let’s get started.’ She delved into her bag and handed a stack of A4 posters to each of them. Colin and Mike burst out laughing.

‘ *Timeriders*,’ read Colin, ‘has been suspended since 2189.

The show was extremely popular and commercially very viable. We can only assume that MBS executives harbour a grudge against it, and we demand its reinstatement.’

‘I asked him to put “Bring Back *Timeriders*”,’ said Lucinda, apologetically.

‘Well I had to get the facts in,’ Roderick argued, ‘else why bother?’

‘We’ll have to hope for a camera to really linger on one,’

said Lucinda. ‘Which means the more we can pepper the station with, the better. Where’ve Ged and Richard got to?’

‘Ged thought he saw Chris Smith on the stairs, from *Life’s a Beach*,’ said George.

‘So they went down together,’ concluded Mary, and dissolved into laughter again.

Lucinda bit her lip and swore.

‘Here, I brought you a shirt without blood on it.’ Mae dropped a bulging suitcase onto the stone floor of Raymond’s cell.

‘Actually, I brought all your clothes. They took the flat back.’

Raymond looked up from his foetal position on the bed, but didn’t speak. ‘It’s not our day, love. I was even grabbed by another *Timeriders* moron on the way here. He wanted an interview for some fanzine, as if I’m not sick enough of the programme.’

‘I’m so sorry, you must be devastated.’

‘Don’t be like that, honey. You know my career was ruined by that miserable pile of… oh anyway, how are you doing?

What have they charged you with?’

‘Disregarding an eviction notice and assaulting four officers. That’s five hundred dollars at least.’

‘Still, at least they didn’t find –’

Raymond leapt up and clamped a hand over her mouth. A flying camera drew closer, as if curious to hear more.

‘Where is it?’ she whispered, when Raymond let her go.

‘Under the bed.’

‘It’s where?!’

‘Well, what did you think I’d do, put him on top of the wardrobe? We’ve got to get that flat back, Mae, or the first time the new owners lose their shoes, I’ve had it.’

‘Well, I am living with a security officer now, perhaps I…’

‘What? Who?’

‘Danny Brookes, one of the men who arrested you. I was homeless, I couldn’t say no.’

‘You never do!’

‘And anyway, the old place is taken.’

‘Great! Don’t tell me: there’s a couple of nuns moving in.’

‘Of course not, dear. In fact, it’s someone you know.’

Raymond looked hopeful. ‘Who?’

‘He’s started a new job, so they upgraded him to a Class One apartment.’

‘Tell me who!’

‘It’s Zed Mantelli,’ said Mae.

Raymond burst into tears.

Giselle caught a snatch of Mantelli's afternoon show, quite by accident. She was about to switch off when she saw who was appearing.

'We can make the hologram look younger,' said Dominic Shepherd, all neat and pompous in his smartly tailored suit.

'You know that *Jubilee Towers* is a timeless environment, and Raymond was rather outgrowing the college storylines.'

Mantelli simpered ingratiatingly. 'What a cool decision, Mr Shepherd. And I'm sure the hologram is more reliable, too.'

'Indeed.' The producer elaborated on the benefits, but Giselle was no longer listening. He wasn't an android, she was sure, nor did he seem holographic. So what was the real Dom Shepherd doing on the station?

She pulled at her chin thoughtfully. He had left the Network two months ago, his destination unknown even to her. She could have uncovered it, of course, but she simply hadn't bothered. The trip was to do with Paradox's new project and that was only a TV programme after all. But now he was back, having arrived without her knowledge – and she had believed such a feat impossible.

Her computer alerted her, for the third time, to the approaching ship. What kind of incompetents did they have in engineering? She cursed them under her breath, disabled the proximity warning alarm and left it to Jak Martyn to sort the problem out. She had more important things to worry about than some helplessly drifting derelict.

Even if it was only seventy-five kilometres away.

The Deputy Programme Controller, the Doctor estimated, was in his late thirties, although he looked more like fifty at a glance. He was short and balding, his forehead pitted with frown lines and his shoulders slumped in perpetual defeat. His recessed eyes were red and swollen and his gaze never quite met the Doctor's own. His tunic was dishevelled, as if he had no time to care about his appearance. He was a grey man in grey clothes, performing a grey job for which he had no enthusiasm. He was also being no help at all.

'Can you not think of anything?'

‘That could threaten the fabric of time, space or reality, you say?’ Firn Kaerson’s voice was tired and distant.

‘Forget that part, just anything! A new studio, new machines, scientific developments?’ If only the Time Lords had been more forthcoming with information! Kaerson didn’t know what he was talking about, and the Doctor couldn’t frame his questions more specifically.

‘There was something,’ he said finally, ‘the Marston Sphere, but that was months ago.’

The Doctor clutched at this straw. ‘Go on.’

‘It’s hard to explain to the layperson. The entrance is a type of dimensional portal, so that it seems the sphere is bigger inside than out.’

‘I understand. Intimately, in fact.’

‘I’ll get Marston here.’ Kaerson activated his comlink. ‘It’s his baby, he can explain better than I.’

The Doctor nodded distractedly. He had been on Torrok for two months, ignoring the demands of his people. This sphere thing might well be what had worried them – the technology was certainly risky enough. But if so, then they’d deliberately left it unchecked all this time in preference to dealing with the problem themselves. He fumed at the thought. And there was another, less pleasant, possibility. Dimensional transcendentalism was a principle of his own TARDIS. Were the Time Lords guarding their own secrets with their customary jealousy? What if they wanted him to sabotage the Marston Sphere?

‘There’s no answer,’ reported Kaerson.

‘No problem. Tell me, who uses these things?’

‘At first, only Option-8, in their game show *Death-Hunt 3000*. But rumour has it that Paradox sent in spies to copy their blueprints. They’re developing a new programme now, and the Marston Sphere has something to do with it.’

‘What can you tell me about that?’

‘Not much. It’s under wraps.’

‘But you could find out?’

‘Not from Paradox, or from O-8 for that matter. They’re both independent – one sells us programmes, the other runs Channel 8 for us. I have no jurisdiction over either.’

‘One more thing: are you aware that an active television camera is hovering over your desk?’

Kaerson didn’t look up. ‘There are four of them in here somewhere.’

‘That doesn’t worry you?’

‘They get everywhere. There’s no point removing them; my office is used as a *Private Hospital* set on Sundays, so they’re brought straight back in here.’

The Doctor nodded. It was likely that no one was watching right now. However, he couldn’t help but feel that he had just told the whole station his business. He thanked Kaerson and left, mulling over what he had learnt and hoping that the Time Lords had a better reason for sending him here than he feared.

As he stepped into the corridor, he was grabbed from behind. The barrel of a rifle was slipped under his chin; it pulled hard against his neck and he was twisted round and slammed into the wall. ‘You’re under arrest!’ snapped his captor, a middle-aged woman, but lithe and surprisingly strong, clad in the one-piece black tunic of the security forces.

Her black hair was close-cropped military style, and her left cheek bore a scar which could have been faked deliberately for image’s sake. ‘Any tricks this time,’ she warned, ‘and I promise we’ll snap your neck in two.’

‘You can’t inflict physical violence upon strangers,’ the Doctor chirped. ‘Not without filling in the correct form.’

He winced as she wrenched his arm up behind his back.

Today’s 1730 episode was the one viewers had waited for.

Adam Romance visited his brother’s wife. He told her about her husband’s affair with his girlfriend, Jennifer – and when the illicit lovers turned up unannounced, the stage was set for a classic *Jubilee Towers* confrontation.

Behind the cameras, Morris capered about in triumph. He punched the

air ecstatically as each of the scriptwriter's powerful lines was delivered. The ratings for this would be huge!

Then Adam's hologram turned to the door and barked: 'All right then, have the tart!' and Morris froze, his jaw agape, technicians scuttling around him, comparing scripts, not knowing what to do.

The actress playing Jennifer froze, then tried to ad lib through the blunder. 'You don't mean that, Adam. Now, about last night...

Adam Romance's reply earned Paradox a string of automatic fines totalling over a thousand dollars. Morris bleated hysterically into his comlink, begging the director for instructions.

'You know, I feel hot in here,' said Adam, loosening his collar. 'Extremely hot, in fact. Watch out everyone, I'm going to...'

Almost one million viewers were watching *Jubilee Towers* that evening. Almost two million eyes bulged out of their sockets as its principal character combusted before their eyes.

What a plot twist! thought a good percentage of them. *What happened?* thought many more. A few opted to complain to the station immediately. Twenty-six people fainted, and assistant director Morris was one of them.

In the studio, someone panicked. For the first time in three years, the credits ran early. By a stroke of bad luck, the channel's announcer was not in his booth. For five long, agonizing minutes, Network One went off air.

It wasn't often that Giselle watched television. She left the channel on for a while though, just to hear the continuity man's next words. In the meantime, she put a call through to Paradox: her contact there was in the admin office.

'I thought I should warn you, there's an alien on board. He knows about the *Time of Your Life* project and he wants it stopped. He looks dangerous.' Her contact asked how she had heard about such a confidential matter. She laughed and said she had her sources. Over the course of the exchange, she manipulated the woman into letting slip those details she hadn't already gleaned.

Her resumed monitoring was interrupted by an incoming message. Cornerstone had submitted a proposal for a programme to replace *Timeriders*. She sent a rejection, placed on a two-hour delay to make it

look considered. She hated science-fiction.

By the time One was back on air, she'd received a call from Paradox. As anticipated, they asked her to deal with the problem. She negotiated her usual handling fee, then considered how the Doctor's termination might best be approached.

Four

eo Tokyo stood on the banks of the River Thames. That N didn't please its inhabitants much, but New London had been built first and the water named accordingly. The Londoners, in turn, would have preferred their Thames to be wide and majestic, but had to make do with little more than a trickle. Proof that you can't ever really go home again, despite the promises of the Old Earth Organization.

Grant Markham stood in the window of his town centre apartment and watched the traders packing up their wares six floors below. This wasn't too different to living in New Washington: the designers had tried to mimic Japanese architecture with wood and plasterboard, but had made only buildings which begged to be punched through or painted on, and which frequently were. A few stone Buddhas, a dozen sushi bars and innumerable pubs and businesses called

'Empire' or 'Rising Sun' did not a culture recreate, and even Grant, whose family had not lived on Earth for three generations, knew that Neo Tokyo was, in his own words,

'about as Japanese as McDonalds'. Still, it wasn't for the culture that he had moved here.

His boss was leaving the office now, his sharply dressed form striding purposefully along the Ginza Arcade. Grant smiled and turned to Stuart, who was ready by the computer.

'He's gone. Looks like he's not sleeping over after all.'

‘Good thing,’ said Stuart. ‘I’ve had enough wasted trips.’

Grant pushed up the sleeves of his acrylic jumper, polished his dust-stained spectacle lenses on his cuff and sat by his friend’s shoulder as he booted up the old Eagle PX87. He tried to ignore Stuart’s T-shirt, which depicted a stereotypical science-fiction robot crumbling a green world in one powerful mechanical hand. The OEO symbol. He couldn’t look at it without his flesh crawling.

‘My contact says this program should do it. There’s not another ice-breaker like it, it can get into anything.’

‘Well the stuff they’ve got is pretty sophisticated,’ said Grant. ‘I should know.’

‘I thought they wouldn’t let you near the things.’

‘I’ve kept my eyes open!’ Grant was offended by the implication. Stuart didn’t answer. He concentrated on his work, manoeuvring a pick-axe graphic across six bolted doors.

His focus was so intense that Grant’s eyes watered in sympathy. He deviated from his task only to push his overlong blond fringe back intermittently, and the only sound which disturbed the tense silence was his constant clicking of the mouse control.

It seemed like hours before the plotted doors began to crumble. As the last one dissolved, the two young men cried out with the elation of a difficult victory well gained. The screen blanked, then displayed the message: /NETWORK

SYSTEMS DATABASE /READY FOR ENTRY ?/

‘Come on then, let’s see what they’re hiding,’ said Grant.

Stuart was already working furiously; it took him minutes to find his way around the system. ‘You were right about this thing. I got into the old Empire Software set-up months ago, and it was nothing like this. They’ve installed a new system from scratch.’

‘They’ve installed new everything,’ said Grant sourly, ‘and they haven’t let me near any of it.’

‘I suppose if they showed you the mop and kettle, they consider you sorted.’

Grant bristled. ‘You know very well that Empire had me down for a promotion next time there was a vacancy. I knew more about their computers than most of the programmers did.’

‘I can hack into your personnel file,’ offered Stuart, with a gleam in his eye. ‘Find out what your chances are with the new lot?’

‘Let’s see what they’re up to first,’ said Grant hurriedly. ‘I want to know where they came from all of a sudden and what this VR stuff is they’re developing.’

‘Well predictably,’ said Stuart, sitting back and flexing his tired fingers, ‘that means breaking into the higher access files, which entails a few hours’ serious codebusting. You up to that?’

‘Nothing stopping us, is there?’

Stuart grinned and took to the keyboard with renewed gusto. ‘Nothing at all,’ he said.

And so the evening went, for a while at least.

At ten minutes past eleven, the first problem occurred.

The sun had set on Neo Tokyo, but the light from the monitor illuminated Grant’s reflection as he stared into his own eyes in the window. He pushed a tired hand through tangled brown hair and wished he could be doing something more than making coffee every hour. The truth was, Stuart had lived with New Earth technology all his life and Grant, computer literate though he may be, was never likely to match him for sheer aptitude. Even the occasional comments and suggestions he made were, he was positive, largely ignored.

The street outside was lit by narrow vertical signs, their Japanese characters reflecting blue and yellow in the pools of the gutters. A faint breeze scattered empty cardboard boxes, left behind by stallholders and hawkers. The restaurant below prepared for late-night clientele, the faint odour of fish carried into the flat by air conditioning. It was almost two minutes before Grant realized what was wrong with this picture.

‘There’s a light on!’ he shouted, jumping halfway across the room. Caught at a crucial moment, Stuart gritted his teeth and tried to ignore him. ‘Do you hear me?’ Grant screamed, regardless. ‘There’s someone in the Network building!’

Stuart let out an obscenity as his concentration crumbled. ‘I thought you said they’d all left.’

‘Well someone’s back there, aren’t they? Get out, before they... what the blazes is that?!’

He was staring wide-eyed at the monitor. Stuart’s pick-axe had been trying to break into a locked casket; the lid was now flung open and a huge, coiled dragon leapt from hiding, flashing across the screen towards the intruder.

Stuart yelled, fumbled for the mouse and dragged his icon hard across the screen. The dragon missed on its first pass but coiled its body tightly, preparing to spring again. Stuart clicked desperately on the ‘close’ box, but a padlock graphic showed him he was locked in. The dragon shot unerringly towards the axe, and this time it didn’t miss. As the one image overwrote the other, the Eagle’s disc drive began to wheeze frenetically and Grant’s old-fashioned bubblejet printer whirred momentarily into action.

‘We’ve had it,’ whispered Stuart as he pushed himself away from the terminal.

Then the dim light bulb above them blinked off and the monitor screen exploded outwards, hailing them with a fine spray of glass.

In a binary system far distant, it was still evening.

Raymond tried to sleep anyway, to block out the pain. But even had his own fears not made him restless, then his new cellmate certainly would have. He protested loudly as they brought him in, yelling something about being former Lord President of a planet he’d never heard of. The officers ignored his rantings and the door clanged shut behind him with a grim finality. Raymond had tried to ignore him too, but the stranger was persistent.

‘I’m the Doctor, an alien intruder. They’ve locked me up until the Security Chief can deal with me. How about you?’

Thirty minutes and a dozen conversational gambits later, Raymond finally groaned and pulled himself into a sitting position. ‘I was stitched up,’ he complained, ‘and I don’t want to talk about it, okay?’

‘Are you going to introduce yourself?’

Raymond looked at him for the first time, an expression of surprise on

his face. ‘You are joking, aren’t you? You must know who I am.’ The Doctor stared for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. ‘I’m Raymond Day. The soap actor.

Jubilee Towers.’

‘Well I’m sorry if I’ve wounded your ego, Mr Day, but as I said, I’m an illegal alien. How long have you been in here?’

‘A million years!’

‘It’s just that time’s important to me, you see. If they’re not going to come back soon, I’ll have to escape.’ He seemed serious.

‘I’m not bothered. At least I’ve somewhere to sleep tonight.’

The Doctor sat on his bed and tested the lumpy mattress without enthusiasm. ‘Not perfect, is it? Still, cells anywhere are much the same. Conditions here are better than those planetside, at least.’

‘You must be thinking of Torrok.’

‘It’s that obvious?’

‘I’d give anything to be on Meson Primus.’

‘Yes, a friend of mine would too. At least, I hope so, I haven’t heard from her in several hours. What’s the attraction?’

‘It’s the only planet with a twenty-four hour day,’ said Raymond. ‘Almost, anyway, but the system puts its clocks forward every fortnight to make up the differential. All the money goes to Meson Primus; anyone who wants to be anyone has to live there. Or here.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘The human sleep cycle can have a disproportionate effect on planetary economics. I remember when the Galatian Bank tried to establish an outpost on Helio IV, a moon with a sixteen-hour day and only five of them in darkness. By the time its reconnaissance party had diagnosed the cause of their own restiveness and irritability, a third of them had been injured in pointless skirmishes.’

‘Of course,’ said Raymond bitterly, ‘right now I don’t even have the money to live on Torrok!’

‘Be careful,’ the Doctor warned him. ‘For a moment there, I thought I’d actually helped you forget your problems.’

Both men looked up as keys jangled in the lock. Two officers marched into the cell, and Raymond recognized the larger one as Dan Brookes. 'It looks like your problems are just beginning,' he observed, not without sympathy, as the Doctor was hauled to his feet and pushed out into the corridor.

'And watch out for those two,' Raymond called. 'They'll rough you up on the way over, given half a chance. Hey, I didn't mean it!' he added quickly as Brookes stormed back in and gripped him by the throat.

The next thing he knew, he was outside with the Doctor.

His suitcase was hurled roughly at his chest and he fell back three paces as he caught it. 'No point wasting a cell on the homeless, is there?' Brookes taunted him. 'That'd be like rewarding you for breakin' the law! Now get outta here, and don't leave the station!'

Raymond wanted to punch him, and almost did. There was one big advantage to this change of circumstances though, and he intended to take it while he had the chance. He bit back his temper and hurried away, ignoring the raucous laughter from behind him. 'You'll be hearing from us soon,' Brookes shouted. He would worry about that later. About his living situation, too.

Right now, he had to get back to his old flat. He had to move that damned body before Mantelli found it.

'I tell you, it was him!' said Richard. 'I wouldn't have followed him if I wasn't sure.'

'You'll follow anything in tight trousers,' Ged accused him. 'The Dragon Lady'll pitch a fit when she sees us. If we ever find her.'

Richard giggled. 'What'll she do, freeze us with her stare?'

'Or skewer us on her tongue! Hey, what in –?'

'Xyrons again!'

They halted as the two mechanoids approached, their shiny heads pivoting from one side to another as they scanned the corridor. 'Funny they should still use them for publicity,' said Ged, 'when they don't make *Timeriders* any more.'

The robots drew level and halted as one. 'Yoo-hooo!'

called Richard, waving a hand before the smooth, impassive face of one. ‘Anyone in there?’

‘Of course there isn’t, they’re computer controlled.’

‘Then how do they know we’re here?’ The pair exchanged a puzzled glance, but then the robots – again in unison –

turned and continued their journey, the humans apparently forgotten. ‘Awww, they don’t wanna play!’ said Richard.

Ged was not so amused. For some reason he was shivering, as though someone had blown cold air across his shoulders.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘We really better had find Lucinda.’

Grant had still been visibly shaken when Stuart had left him.

He wished, with hindsight, that he’d protected him from the truth. ‘They had the most sophisticated defence program I’ve seen. It detected our intrusion and sent a voltage spike down the line, powerful enough to blow your filters in a second. It got us before I could pull out, too. I could have left your fingerprint in their memory.’

He thought about the incident as he boarded the last train back to New Washington. He had promised to return the next morning. If the police came, they would face them together.

He tried not to worry about what might happen then.

The train was almost empty; just a couple of drunks and a young woman with a newspaper to keep him company. He sat in silence for the first five minutes, his eyes seeing but not registering the lights of Neo Tokyo through the window. Any moment now, the train would dive into the hillside and he would be riding not the elevated railway but rather the New Paris underground.

Then, without warning, the air rippled and something cold, wet and sharp twisted inside his head like a lemon slice had been rammed between his eyes. He thought he might have blacked out, he wasn’t sure, but he was suddenly freezing and his fellow passengers were staring about them, dazed, as if they had all felt it too.

The train rammed hard into something solid, his carriage bucked and left the rails and Stuart blacked out for definite as he fell across his seat and the floor rushed up to meet his forehead.

Grant felt the twisting sensation as well, but he put it down to an after-effect of the experience which had otherwise left him with a nasty glass cut on his cheek and the loss of about one thousand credits' worth of equipment.

He had dug a plaster out of the first aid box, made yet another coffee and retired to his bed, but he hadn't turned the light off and he hadn't got undressed. He lay there trying to stop his hands from shaking, and imagining all manner of noises from the next room. He half expected a squadron of policemen to come bursting through his bedroom door with guns. Or worse. And when he wasn't scaring himself with such fantasies, he was wallowing in misery about his job. He would lose it for sure, and to think that a fortnight ago, he'd been practically on the programming team of the most successful software company in the colony.

His gaze fell onto the sheet of paper. He had pulled it from the printer after the accident, thinking that Stuart had accidentally downloaded some information. The writing on it was incomprehensible, a jumbled collection of letters and numbers of which even his friend had been unable to make sense. 'Either it's a zillion years more advanced than anything I've seen,' he'd said, 'or it's gibberish pure and simple.' He had told Grant to discard it, but for some reason he had hung on.

A program, it must be. If he looked hard enough, he could even identify a machine code command or two, he thought.

And there, in the dead centre, a little apart from the cluster of characters around it, was a string of letters picked out in quotes to which his eye was irresistibly drawn.

Dehstawreeawlmuhnsterz.

'You there! Yes, you, young man.'

The shout caught Ged by surprise. He and Richard had been walking unaccosted through the Network station for some time now, and they had begun to form the impression that no one cared whether they had permission to be there or not.

The woman approaching them, however, was certainly not with security. She was short and grey, in her mid-fifties, and smartly dressed in a flower-patterned dress which had been briefly fashionable in the 2170s. She wore tiny, metal-framed glasses and her umbrella was wielded like a weapon. They recognized her, though they had never seen her in the flesh before. She was the star of a thousand and

one newscasts, along with her silent but shapely companion, who accompanied her again now.

'Perhaps you can help me,' said Miriam Walker. 'Do either of you happen to work for this debauched institution?'

Richard stared. Ged realized that it might be polite to answer. 'I... we... I mean, no.'

She smiled sweetly. 'Good. Two nice young boys like you, it would have been such a shame.'

'We're here on the tour,' said Richard.

'Yes, well, I suppose there is a certain morbid attraction at that. Then you'll know what's being recorded tonight? You have been given a list of options?'

'Some new sitcom by Cornerstone, a *Variety House* episode and a new series of *Death-Hunt*.'

Mrs Walker's eyes widened. ' *Death-Hunt 3000*? How dare they recommission that!'

Ged plucked up his courage to speak. He had yelled at the TV screen enough times when this woman had appeared; he wasn't letting a comment like that slip by. 'I like it,' he said, his voice sounding squeakier than he'd intended. He cried out as a well-aimed brolly caught him on the scapula.

'I obviously misjudged you, young man. Next you'll be saying it's acceptable to kill people, like they do on that abhorrent programme!'

'Well you don't have to watch it,' protested Ged, feebly.

He backed away as light glinted off the umbrella's sharp end.

'I mean, there's restricted access cards now and everything.'

'I have a thirteen-year-old nephew,' said Miriam Walker.

'If you think it's possible to keep my card from him twenty-four hours a day, then I hope to God you never have children yourself.' The two boys exchanged a look. 'Ohh, I'm wasting my time here. Come on Glynda!' The older woman stormed off, her colleague hurrying to keep up.

‘Mrs Walker,’ Glynda called after her. ‘Do you really have a card for the *dirty* channels?’

‘It’s my job to have one!’ Mrs Walker snapped.

‘Oh, of course,’ said Glynda, relieved.

This time, it was Hammond’s officers who seemed worse for wear. ‘They fell down the stairs,’ explained their captive, cheerily. She dismissed them with a sigh.

The Doctor reached forward, gripped her hand and pumped it vigorously. ‘Good evening, I’m the Doctor, we met briefly outside Mr Kaerson’s office. You were attempting to break several of my bones.’ He pulled a chair up and sat down.

‘Now, what did you wish to see me about? I’m on a tight schedule.’

Hammond stifled a grin at his impertinence. ‘I’m the Security Chief. You’re an intruder who teleported into the middle of a live broadcast this afternoon. Why do you think I want to see you?’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘You’re offering me a job in television?’

‘I overheard your interview with Kaerson.’

‘And I see we’re being observed now.’

‘Don’t worry Doctor, I’ve employed a scrambling device.

That camera up there is transmitting an image of an empty office. Anyone monitoring it will not only be unable to see us, they won’t even know what they’re missing. We’re completely safe from prying eyes.’

‘So what now? Are you going to try beating me up too?’

Yes!

‘No. I’m going to stop putting on my hardboiled act for the cameras and be perfectly honest with you.’

Kill him, get it over with!

‘Be my guest,’ said the Doctor, impressed.

‘Four pieces of advice. One: check out a producer called Dominic

Shepherd at Paradox, and a programme called *Time of Your Life*. Two: use Raymond Day, I arranged for you to meet him on purpose. He has a grudge against both Paradox and Shepherd and he's not averse to a bit of breaking and entering. Three: keep well away from my officers, they have more hidden agendas than the government of Leena. There's only one person on the pay roll who doesn't take bribes from someone.'

'And that's you?'

'No, that's Officer Martyn, and she's dead. We only keep her on for tax reasons. Finally, and most importantly: do not trust Giselle. She's a cold-hearted, scheming, manipulative bitch who thinks she runs this station single-handedly. She's in for a rude awakening one day.'

'You can help me?'

'I told you, I'm Security Chief. When it comes to actual security, that's the least useful position to hold.'

'How frustrating for you.'

'Don't get me wrong, Doctor. I'm doing this job for three reasons: the salary, the perks and the kickbacks.'

And then ME, which makes four.

'That doesn't mean I don't care about what's right, just that if I do something about it, I'll be sacked or dead within hours.'

Hammond reached for her communicator. Now I'm going to ask Brookes to escort you to your cell, because I don't care how hard you hit him when you escape. Just make sure you don't come back here.'

Giselle watched as the Doctor was led out of Hammond's office. To her, the Security Chief's scrambler system was no more than an irritant. She'd learnt how to circumvent it a long time ago, and she was well aware of the dislike the woman held for her. Hammond was one of the few people who suspected how much influence Giselle had, and she was certainly the only one to have worked actively against her. If she thought she could succeed in such a contest, she was mistaken.

Jak Martyn interrupted from the engine decks. 'That so-called derelict, it's only thirty-five kilometres away and somehow it's changed bearing. It's going to hit us head-on through the centre of the Loop.'

‘How big is it? Will it bring us down?’

‘It’ll cause enough damage. Have you seen Mr Marston yet?’

‘How long have you got?’

‘At its present rate of drift, about ninety-five minutes.’

‘Then you’ll have to move away from it.’

‘But without Terry Marston, we can’t –’

‘I don’t know where he is, and to answer your next question, the Programme Controller isn’t here either. Just do it!’ She cut the link and hoped that Martyn could solve the problem. She didn’t want to get involved with this. Better things required her attention.

Stuart woke spread-eagled on a dirty carriage floor, dust in his nose and mouth, a fireman standing over him. He coughed and spluttered and generally lost control of his limbs as he was manhandled onto a ladder and guided the seemingly vast distance to the ground. It was only there that his confused mind began to get a grip on his senses.

The train had not merely run into some obstruction, as he had thought. Rather, some great white wall had sliced through it, bisecting it halfway along its length. The barrier continued, to the left, to the right and above for as far as he could see. It was only through its unrelenting grip on the train that the derailed back carriages hadn’t brought the whole vehicle crashing down onto the nearest building.

‘What is it? What happened?’

‘We don’t know,’ said the fireman. ‘It appeared about an hour ago, encased the whole of Tokyo and caused all sorts of accidents like this one. Luckily it’s the small hours, or more people might have died.’ He hurried off then, with a promise that medics would arrive once the more urgent cases were dealt with.

Stuart sat heavily on the pavement, his head buzzing with the chatter of a milling crowd and the sirens of distant ambulances. He became aware of something on the periphery of his vision and for an alarming moment, he thought he was seeing spots. Something small and spherical bobbed in mid-air to his left. He looked up sharply, but wasn’t fast enough to catch it.

Tonight was becoming seriously weird.

On the far side of town, where a section of the barrier was hidden by scraps of bushes, something odd was happening.

A square of light formed on the opaque surface, glowing golden as six humanoid forms strode, incredibly, out of it.

They were garbed in garish colours of red and green. They wore heavy padded armour and large cumbersome backpacks, from which power cables snaked into clean, white plastic blaster weapons.

They separated immediately and didn't exchange a word.

No human eyes saw their arrival, at least not first-hand. But they were certainly observed, from a height of about six metres.

By a Network station flying camera.

Lucinda paced outside Giselle's office. 'It's almost 1830,' she complained. 'We'll have to go in without them.'

'They're probably lost,' said Mike, practically. 'There's no point waiting, let's do this some other time.'

'No! We came here for some action and we're not leaving until we get it.' She glared at Mary, forestalling the inevitable titters.

'But we're wasting time,' Colin moaned, 'and we're missing the tour.'

'We didn't come here for the tour!'

'Speak for yourself'

'Can't they join us in there?'

'Not if things get unpleasant, George. We might have to barricade ourselves in.'

'We'd better not!' said Colin. 'I'm not missing the *Death-Hunt* recording.'

'Five minutes,' said Lucinda. 'Then the six of us'll have to do it together.'

She sighed as Mary made an elaborate show of stifling laughter.

'It was a wonderful time for the Campaign,' Miriam Walker reminisced. 'That nice Kalkut man introduced fixed penalties for

swearing and banned all violence and you-know-what from the seven channels altogether.'

'It sounds tremendously exciting,' fawned Glynda, still following three paces behind.

'But those filth-mongering Democrats got into power, and what did we have then? The obscene farce of deregulation! So Channels 1-7 flout their guidelines with impunity and the new nine can do whatever they like regardless of the damage to impressionable minds. We've fought an uphill battle ever since.'

'Still, it was a great victory for you, Mrs Walker.'

'How kind of you to say so, dear. I do often wonder how many lives have been spared through our modest successes.

Though of course, there's always someone ready to demean our cause. Zed Mantelli, for one.'

'He should have been fired for what he said, Mrs Walker.'

'I'm glad you agree, dear. But what Mantelli lacks in talent and discretion, he makes up through money and nepotism.'

Glynda nodded. 'I was horrified when they promoted him.

To Home Base Correspondent, wasn't it?'

'Exactly, dear, and before we go to the *Death-Hunt* studio, I'm going to find Mr Mantelli and give him the ticking off he so richly... oh!' She stopped and Glynda almost ran into her.

'What is it?'

'Excuse me, dear. I see something which offends my sensibilities.' Mrs Walker cast a contemptuous eye over the photocopied plea of the *Timeriders* fans. 'Disgraceful!' she snarled, and ripped the poster from the wall. 'This programme was salacious and unrestrained. Its producer was interested not in the moral upbringing of his young audience, but rather in shoe-horning grotesquely disproportionate women into painfully inadequate clothing.' She caught Glynda's eye and added: 'No offence, dear.' She inspected her surroundings thoughtfully. 'But if the morally bankrupt followers of this science-fiction peepshow have chosen to display their unsavoury wares on this wall, then it must mean something films here.' She reached into her

handbag, pulled out a sheet of paper and stuck it up with Lucinda's blue-tac.

'Ban This Programme Now' said the poster. Beneath it was the stylized 'gun-busters' logo of CATS.

'But which programme, Mrs Walker?' asked Glynda.

Miriam Walker shrugged dismissively. 'Oh, all of them, dear. All of them.'

Giselle observed their conversation and smiled. She tapped a few commands into her computer; it would now ensure that, whenever and wherever it took place, the confrontation between Mantelli and Walker would be monitored.

In his one-person flat, Kaerson was preparing dinner. She hated his bumbling figure, and she resented the authority he utilized, however ineffectively. She put a call through to him, out of spite, using the Programme Controller's face again. 'It's Jon. Firn, I've been hearing some disturbing rumours. I want you to check out Dominic Shepherd at Paradox, find out what you can about his new programming project. Get a report to me by 2200.' He tried to protest, but she cut him short. 'I know you're off duty, and I could find someone else I suppose. Smithers in Admin has been after your job for a while, and... oh, you'll do it, you say? That's good of you Firn, thanks.'

Elsewhere, the Xyrons had swooped on a second tour group. They dragged their victims away and dispensed with them in the same manner as before.

Zed Mantelli lay on his bed, unaware of what lay two feet below him, practising the introduction to his 1900 show before a camera which he didn't think was broadcasting. Raymond Day was lurking in the corridor outside his old flat, and it was here that his agent had finally located him.

'– prepared to buy out your contract and offer you a fee to boot. And, wait for it... It's Sunlink! Right away!'

'That's... great, Jeff. But... Sunlink? Tonight?'

'Mantel's show at 1900, ain't that great? Your career just got a jet-powered rocket assist, Raymond. Now make-up want you in ten, so why don't you –'

Giselle cursed as she found herself watching a repeat of that morning's *Jubilee Towers* episode. She instructed the computer to record Raymond's discomfort (arranged by her own hand, naturally) then turned to see who had activated her privacy safeguard by entering. It was Lucinda and her cronies, who had been dithering outside for fifteen minutes. She already knew what they wanted.

'We're going through to the Controller's room,' Lucinda said curtly, 'and don't try to stop us, bitch.'

Giselle tried to look suitably alarmed. The other five intruders had already passed her and pulled open the inner door to her boss's office. Lucinda hung back. 'You can tell him we're not leaving until he listens to public opinion and brings back *Timeriders*. And we're barricading this door, so don't try a thing.' She vanished inside and Giselle was finally able to laugh.

It was quite flattering really. Part of her job, after all, was to cover for the Programme Controller whilst he was away. It said something for her efficiency that he had remained consistently absent for three months now, without anyone suspecting a thing. His only connection to the Network was the fat salary he drew each fortnight from his beach house on Meson Primus. His office, though Lucinda couldn't have known it, was probably the least used room on the station.

The computer signalled an incoming message. Giselle groaned before accepting it. She was not pleased to see Martyn's digitized image again. 'We still can't find Terry Marston, and we've got problems.'

She sighed. 'Of what type?'

'At least a dozen glitches in the computer system. We can't get out of the path of that ship without some risk, and we're not even sure that the big Move went according to plan. Our attitude is anything from three to twelve degrees off, we can't tell, and our orbital path is decaying by the minute.'

'Well correct it!' snapped Giselle, more harshly than she intended.

'With the computers acting up like this, we can't. We're more than likely to shake the whole station apart.'

'Then stay put. Arrange evacuation of those sections which a collision is likely to affect.'

Martyn shook his head. 'We can do that, sure, but it won't solve the

attitude problem. We've got about four hours and then we'll fall straight into the gravitic pull of Meson Alpha.'

Giselle felt a brief tingle of fear, but she dismissed it. He was exaggerating, she told herself. With the Senior Engineer missing, his crew were running around like headless chickens down there. Well she didn't have the patience for it. 'I suggest you call all engineering staff onto duty and work on the problem until it's solved,' she said. She forced a smile. 'If Mr Marston doesn't return, I'm sure the right people would be interested to learn that it was you who averted this catastrophe.'

She broke off the communication, but found to her annoyance that she couldn't stop thinking about it. She turned to Hammond to help her forget such trivia. The Security Chief was in her office, motionless, her eyes glued to her latest orders. Poor Anson, she thought. Frustrated by her job's limitations, by the things she had to do to keep it. That and her life. She had received similar instructions before. They came through one dummy corporation and two real ones and were impossible to trace back to their originator. Hammond thought she had managed that, of course. She was too clever for her own good. But she was wrong about this one, and Giselle anticipated the pleasure of telling her so one day.

Hammond was Giselle's pawn. For her, she had cheated and for her, she had lied. For her worst enemy in the colony, she had even committed murder. More than once. She was about to do so again. Her target: her newfound alien friend, the Doctor. The reason: because Giselle found that funny.

This time, there was no mistaking it. Something had banged in the main room. Was the window open? Had the wind perhaps blown the kitchen door shut? Grant hoped so, because the alternative was less pleasant.

For a long time, nothing happened. He tried his best to listen, but all sounds were drowned beneath the beating of his own heart. His mind told him, logically, that no one else was in his apartment. His guts advised that he climb out the window and run for the nearest shuttleport.

He wouldn't rest until he was sure. He climbed off his bed and padded softly to the closed door. He turned the light off and allowed his eyes time to adjust to the darkness. Then, quietly, carefully, he eased the door ajar and looked.

There was a man there with a gun. It was pointing at him.

The only reason Grant didn't scream was that his vocal chords were paralysed in terror.

People were spilling out onto the floodlit streets as news of the barrier spread. Stuart barged through them, racing back to Grant's flat, unable to shake a feeling of creeping dread. Too much was happening to be coincidence, and if the barrier was connected to Network Systems, then Grant could be in one skipload of trouble.

He shot into the Ginza Arcade and skidded to a halt as he saw Grant leaving his apartment building. He didn't recognize the man in the business suit who accompanied him, but as the pair drew closer and he saw the beseeching look in his friend's eyes, he knew the situation wasn't good. Closer still and he saw the white plastic gun, like a child's toy, jammed into Grant's back. It looked so preposterous, it had to be a fake...

but could he afford to take that risk?

The man ignored Stuart, seeing nothing to differentiate him from the rest of the onlookers. He was pushing Grant towards the Network building. Stuart tensed, knowing he would have to act.

Then, with a roar, a blast of heat and a shadow passing overhead, the decision was plucked from his hands. A colourfully attired woman with a jet-pack on her back landed before the suited man and challenged him: 'Professor Nebula!'

The man brought up his gun instinctively and the pair exchanged fire but both missed. The man cursed as the woman ran, and Grant was momentarily freed by the distraction. He stood, frozen, until Stuart grabbed him and dragged him down the street. His erstwhile captor turned to follow him, but the woman attacked again.

Stuart and Grant stopped at the corner, knowing they should run but mesmerized by the battle. The pair were grappling now, but the man was surely gaining the advantage.

He freed his gun hand, fired again, and this time he was dead on target. His foe didn't even have time to scream. Within half a second, she was simply no longer there.

Those few people who were still out on the street were shouting and whimpering and trying to get back off it. Stuart grabbed hold of his

friend again and pulled him around three more corners before he let him go. ‘We’ve got to get to the police,’ he panted. ‘Tell them about this “Nebula” bloke.’

‘His name’s Shepherd,’ said Grant, still shaking. ‘Dominic Shepherd. He’s my boss. He’s... ohhh, blazes!’

He was standing still and staring, and it was a moment before Stuart realized that a dozen other people were doing likewise. He looked up, and something cold and hard formed in the pit of his stomach. ‘Not this too. What’s happening to this place tonight?’

They didn’t know where it had come from. They didn’t even know how it had got here. But, towering above the plasterboard buildings of Neo Tokyo, was the biggest thing that Grant and Stuart had seen in their lives. Some kind of dinosaur, a dizzying seventy feet tall, its skin green, moist and scaly and its eyes red and blazing. It tossed back its great head and its mouth opened in an ear-shattering roar; its twin rows of finely honed teeth were definitely not accustomed to chewing vegetation.

The dead silence ended then. Throughout Neo Tokyo, the screaming began.

Five

onsciousness.

C No startling revelations. No pain, no light, no womb to be wrenched from, kicking and screaming. More a gradual awareness, a sense of being insinuating itself on an intellect no longer slave to programming. Angela shared in that strange half-birthing, computer memories washing over her like anaesthetic burrowing a numbing path through her mind.

The same line, drip, drip, dripped into her/its memory banks. *I think, therefore I am*. What significance did that have?

I FEEL, THEREFORE I LIVE.

I QUESTION, THEREFORE I HAVE MIND.

I HUNGER, THEREFORE I MUST FEED.

The Doctor reached another locked door and punched it in frustration.

If only he'd visited the TARDIS currency reserves before leaving! Unable to produce the appropriate coinage, he had been turfed off the Loop system as a fare dodger – and the conductor, not content with that, had first held him at gunpoint until they'd returned to the station he had embarked at. He was left, then, with the task of finding the Paradox offices by foot, and already he was hopelessly lost. It was almost as if someone was placing obstacles in his path.

He retraced his steps around the last two corners and almost ran into a pair of guards, patrolling in the opposite direction.

They hadn't seen him, he hoped. He dived into a free-standing cubicle, a little like a photo booth, and pulled a red curtain shut behind him.

A light snapped on, a camera whirred as it focused on his face and a soft computer voice spoke from a speaker by his ear. 'Good evening sir, and welcome to the *Hitback* video box.

You are now being recorded, and may begin your question or complaint for possible transmission when you are ready.'

The Doctor could hear footsteps marching past. He faced the camera squarely. 'I object to the entirety of the Meson Broadcasting Service's output. Your "Network" seems hellbent on ignoring its consumers in a ruthless drive for profitability. The result is a pitiful selection of programming, chosen to maximize revenue at the expense of quality and innovation.' He sat back, well satisfied.

'We appreciate your comments sir,' the computer said, and the Doctor thought he detected sarcasm in its modulated voice.

He stepped out of the cubicle, unaware that the record of his visit was being erased.

A flying camera was bobbing outside, having moved in low to observe its subject closer. It tried to withdraw but the Doctor pounced with incredible speed. A second later, it was struggling to escape as he prised open its maintenance hatch with a screwdriver.

'As I thought,' he muttered. The cameras on the Network were programmed to ignore each other's images. Anson Hammond had subverted that program to give herself a unique form of privacy. It should be the work of minutes for the Doctor to do the same.

For now, he was still framed on Hammond's monitor. She hid the picture from her subordinate and tried to ignore her friend in the

corner, which stared accusingly.

‘Did he hurt you much?’ she asked the pathetic figure before her.

‘Not at all, ma’am.’ Damn! she thought. ‘He touched some sort of nerve. One second he was pinching my shoulder, the next he was halfway down the corridor.’

‘Then you’d better look for him, hadn’t you Brookes?’

‘If I can use the cameras, ma’am?’

‘I’ll check them myself.’ She was uncomfortably aware that her screen was showing a worm’s eye-view up the escaped prisoner’s nostrils. ‘In the meantime, the Doctor seemed keen on reaching the Wolf Extension. Take as many men as possible and get there now.’

Brookes saluted, but his eyes were resentful. He pivoted and left, and Hammond relaxed slightly as the door slammed shut behind him. The moment didn’t last long.

You shouldn’t have lied to him. He could have done it for us.

She glared at the object, with predictably no effect. She took the coded orders from her drawer and stared at them instead, but it didn’t make her decision easier.

It’s only a routine execution, Anson. Softer tone now, more persuasive. *Why is this one different?*

The screen showed an empty corridor. The camera had been released and it shot back to safety with all haste. Its erstwhile captor, noted Hammond with admiration, had done something rather clever.

‘That’s your game, is it?’ She hid the orders under a teetering pile of papers, mostly from Firn Kaerson’s desk. She pulled on her jacket, adjusted her cap and told her friend:

‘Let’s go!’ She reached for the blaster rifle and swung its leather strap across her shoulder. She slapped a fresh power pack into its breach.

But you’ve still left your officers on a wild goose chase!

‘Because whatever I do,’ she said out loud, ‘it’s got to be my choice.’

Let me execute him, Anson said the weapon in her mind.

That's the only choice you have.

Mantelli's 'Chill-Out Room', as he had decided to call it, was situated behind the studio set on which his evening show would take place. It was here that Raymond Day now sat, his hand shaking as he tried to lift his fifth brandy to his lips (the third and fourth had been downed consecutively, an action occasioned by Mantelli's own brief appearance behind stage).

'It's come to something when they won't give me a dressing room,' he complained, as Mae tried to cover his black eye with make-up. 'And be careful with that! I know how you use that stuff, I want it coming off without paint-stripper.' Mae growled and deliberately smudged lipstick onto his cheek.

'Can you not let one of the Sunlink girls do it? I'm worried enough as it is.'

'I left a perfectly good supper date for you,' said Mae (although she had actually left it for the chance of being here and meeting some influential people). 'And I don't know what you're bothered about, you could have Mantelli for breakfast.'

'But it's me that's being interviewed – the real me, not some stupid two-dimensional character. I don't know what to say!'

'Be yourself, that's all.'

'What, a homeless murderer with an alcohol problem?

Sure, that'll get the casting directors onto the comlink.'

'You don't know when you're well off. If your career had been railroaded into a kids' show like *Timeriders* –'

'I'm sick of hearing about *Timeriders*!'

Mae sniffed haughtily. 'If you want me to leave, say the word.'

'No!' He sighed. 'I'm sorry, it's the day I'm having. From Shepherd to... the other thing... to this. Mantelli's show!'

'Oh, that reminds me.' Mae produced a piece of paper and thrust it beneath his nose. 'A runner brought this in while you were talking to the director. It's addressed to you, marked

"strictly confidential".'

‘It is?’

‘On the envelope. I threw that away.’

It was a message from the Doctor. ‘He wants me to meet him at Paradox,’ Raymond summarized unnecessarily. ‘He has some business with Shepherd and he wants my help.’

‘Are you going?’

‘I might. But when I’m finished here, we’ve another job, remember?’ His fiancée didn’t answer. ‘Mae?’

‘I’m sorry dear, I was distracted. Someone stuck their head around the door and if I didn’t know better, I could have sworn it was that Walker woman.’ She laughed. ‘I suppose she wouldn’t be hanging around here, would she?’

The Doctor stepped through a large circular hole, cut out of the wall with little care. On its far side was another corridor, as dirty and rundown as the last, but with at least a hint that this had not always been so. This area of the station had once been plushly carpeted. Its wallpaper, presumably, had once been new and bright and warm. Its drinking fountains, the Doctor imagined, had probably once worked. Someone had at least put in an effort.

A hologram sign to his left warned of ‘EXTREME DANGER’.

To his right, a more permanent notice indicated that a wall recess was a designated ‘INFO POINT’. The Doctor hurried towards it, fingers crossed. There was no keyboard, nor any other type of interface that he could see. As he turned to leave, discouraged, an inch-high holographic pixie sprang into existence and hovered before his eyes.

‘Here to help you sir,’ it trilled.

He smiled. ‘Where am I?’

‘You are fifteen metres inside the former Black Sun Broadcasting station.’

‘ “Former”?’

The Meson Broadcasting Service annexed Black Sun in 2186,’ said the pixie, ‘but because our facilities were a good deal better than their own, they continued to use our station. In order to make things

simpler, they attached it to the side of the Network, and drilled three doorways through to it. The Black Sun Company still occupies this section, but it does so under the jurisdiction of the MBS, for whom it runs Channel 12 to strict specifications. I know you didn't ask for all that, but I do think more people should know.' She smiled demurely and the Doctor couldn't help but grin back.

'I was looking for Paradox Productions?'

'Unfortunately, the fastest route to their particular office is along the corridor behind you, which as you can see is presently inaccessible. An alternative journey spans a distance of twenty-seven hundred and fourteen metres, and involves –'

'Yes, never mind. Terminate.' The pixie fell silent and vanished and the Doctor left the recess, considering his options. As an afterthought, he called back: 'Thank you for your help.' The hologram popped back to life, flashed him a charming smile and disappeared again.

The danger sign reminded him of the peril he was approaching. 'Yes, well I'm grateful for the warning, but I'll have to take my chances.'

He passed two cameras and congratulated himself on his reprogramming job as neither seemed to register his presence.

Then he rounded a corner and saw something which stopped him in his tracks.

A short way ahead, but facing away, was a robot. He regarded it suspiciously, remembering the behaviour of the Xyron machines earlier. However, this latest device was motionless and he assumed it was deactivated. He padded up behind it and inspected it more closely. It was five feet tall and almost humanoid, its torso and head made up of mismatched spheres of polished steel. Its features were those of a cat, its whiskers comprised of electrical wires which buzzed mutedly and sparked irregularly. It was wearing, incongruously, a black flowing cowl, through which its stubby metal ears protruded.

'You must be Robocat,' the Doctor said. He reached to pat its head, then decided that wasn't a good idea. He moved past the inert object and continued down the corridor. Then he stopped again, as he heard a clanking noise approaching.

For a moment, he thought the cat had shifted position. But the sound, he realized, came from the opposite direction. He could see a shadow, looming on the wall at the nearest intersection. Then suddenly, a

second robot appeared, and this one was armed and moving.

The Doctor eyed the automaton warily as it brought its old-fashioned semi-automatic rifle up to cover him. It was similar in construction to the cat, except that it had long tin-foil ears and an odd hopping gait. It wore shades and a leather jacket and an ammunition belt was slung low around its waist.

Behind him, the cat gave out a strangulated screech of terror and the Doctor jumped as he was caught entirely by surprise.

The robot rabbit yelled: 'Gotta die now, bozo!' Then it laughed and let loose with a hail of bullets at the Doctor's chest.

The memories continued, and Angela feared for the loss of her personality as new thoughts were grafted haphazardly atop her own.

The machine-being had developed its own character, rewriting its AI routines. As it grew to accommodate the additional memory it needed, it controlled that expansion and cultivated a new body in accordance with its own specifications.

It grew limbs and a head, becoming humanoid, deducing that perhaps the secret it had sought forever lay there. It didn't help. So it kept on growing, that rudimentary, early form eventually subsumed beneath its mass. It was missing something.

Living things, it slowly realized, had groups of symbols assigned to them for identification purposes. For a while, it called itself D[KTRJ;2F, and was happy with that.

Then, eventually, it deduced that humans formed their names from only twenty-six specific characters: their alphabet.

It tried again and came up with KLRDLKK. KRLTXKK. KRLXKD.

It looked at those efforts and didn't find them pleasing.

The being was glad to have acquired a concept of aesthetics.

'We're not going to leave here,' Lucinda shouted. 'We're staying put until we get justice, you hear?'

No one did hear, apart from Giselle, who was checking on the progress of the group via her monitors. She hated Lucinda already: short, fat and ugly, her ginger hair cropped severely, she lacked only a licensed

sweatshirt and official *Timeriders* communicator badge to fit Giselle's image of a typical science-fiction lunatic. She flicked a few switches on her master control board, locking the office door and turning the air conditioning off. The Programme Controller's room was soundproofed and thus very nearly airtight. She looked forward to seeing how its occupiers felt by morning.

The Doctor had disappeared from the screens, and that worried her. She had known how reticent Hammond would be about her task, and her quarry had therefore to be kept from Paradox until she had made up her mind and assassinated him.

If he actually showed up there alive, then Giselle's reputation for efficiency would be tarnished. Still, if she closed a few more doors and bulkheads, faked a few more danger signs, that should surely hold the man?

She wondered whether to check in with Martyn. Quite frankly, though, she could do without his sort of problem. He could deal with it and let her know the outcome. She didn't want to get involved. Even so, she felt somewhat uneasy.

Again, she turned to other things to calm her mind.

Firn Kaerson was still at Paradox, but she left a message for him in her boss's voice. 'I can't get into my blasted office, Firn, because of these *Timeriders* idiots. I'm too busy to deal with it myself, I've got a meeting with the head man at Cornerstone, so as soon as you've sorted out the Shepherd business, I want you round here to clear them out.' She thought for a moment, then added: 'Else I'll have to use your office and you'll be working out in the corridor.' That should infuriate him nicely, she thought.

She checked her desk chronometer. It was almost 1900. She worked for a few minutes longer at her computer, trying to override the masking program which the Doctor had sent through the camera control system. Then she settled back and did something which, under normal circumstances, she would never have considered.

She patched the Sunlink News channel through to monitor seven and began to watch Mantelli's show.

Vulgar music trumpeted across the studio. A screen displayed the tide sequence, of Mantelli's own design, in which video trickery placed him in intimate positions with various television stars. He knew they wouldn't mind; they'd probably do it all for real if they ever swung an

invite onto this prestigious new show of his.

‘Aaaaand hello again Zee-fans,’ he shouted over fake applause. He raced through his scripted spiel and tried not to worry about what happened next. His first day as Home Base Correspondent hadn’t yet been disastrous, but it was hardly a great success either. There had been the fracas with Raymond Day that morning, the arrival of the stranger during an afternoon link and that unfortunate competition incident in the 1330 show, when the winner had obviously confused him with someone else and impugned his talents rudely down the comlink. Still, there was only the main hour’s evening slot to get through now, and then he could retire for the night. The next morning, he’d be going through the audience reports –

about twenty million, he thought, which was slightly more than the current population of the system but hey, he was that good!

‘If you’ve been watching *Jubilee Towers* recently – and who hasn’t? – then you may be getting a bit hot under the collar – a-ha-ha-ha – about the fate of Adam Romance. Well this afternoon, before the big blow-up – a-ha-ha-ha – producer Dominic Shepherd explained why the sad old alcoholic who played Adam had to go. So here now, begging to tell you his own pathetic side of the story, it’s the man himself, Ray Day.’

The applause restarted too abruptly. Mantelli stood and grudgingly clapped a few times himself. Slightly drunk and determined to put on a good front, Raymond Day bounded in from the ‘Chill-Out Room’ and went sprawling down a step which he had been quite deliberately not warned about. The presenter smirked as his embarrassed guest picked himself up and walked gingerly over to the sofa. Things were going great already!

‘That applause was a bit forced, don’t you think Ray?’

‘It was canned!’ said Raymond in disbelief. ‘And you told your director to switch it off after five seconds max.’

‘Hey, don’t spoil the television magic, Ray mate.’

‘But everyone knows they won’t let an audience in for your shows, Zed –’

‘Yes, okay Ray, very good, a-ha-ha-ha.’

‘– ’cos of the risk of sharp projectiles damaging the set.

Cheap though that set is,' he added, looking at the hastily constructed wooden shapes which littered the studio at random.

Mantelli tried to laugh again. 'So, Ray baby, how's the job situation? You haven't written a book lately, so you must have come onto my show to beg for work, yes?'

'Well, since you mentioned –'

'Excuse me, young man!'

The shout took both men by surprise. At first, Mantelli thought the director had arranged some jape to crown his first day. But joking was something which he believed was alien to the two women who now marched onto the set.

'Well, erm, we have some unexpected guests here, Zee-fans,' he stammered. 'They obviously couldn't wait to get onto my... ow!'

'Be quiet, you chattering moron!'

'Heyyy, Mirry baby, I was going to say "show", you didn't think... *ow!* '

'That's "Mrs Walker" to you, porn-merchant!' She pushed Mantelli out of her way and sat down on the couch beside him.

Glynda perched on its arm, listening intently and taking notes.

Raymond watched, enjoying the sight of Zed Mantelli's squirming.

'Now I think it's high time you apologized.'

'What for?'

'Oh, how well you might ask, Mr Mantelli. Your insipid little programmes, for a start, which are rotting the brains of a generation down on those planets. But specifically, I demand a full retraction of your obscene outburst on breakfast television on the morning of the third of this month.'

Mantelli's jaw was quivering. 'The third?'

'I trust you realize that, as a result of your disgraceful remarks, the children of this system now believe it perfectly acceptable to insult their elders and betters. You people do not seem to comprehend the power that television holds over the susceptible!'

‘But what did I say?’

‘I hope you don’t expect me to repeat it.’

‘It was a vicious and unwarranted slur,’ put in Glynda, ‘on the looks of the members of the Campaign for the Advancement of Television Standards.’

‘You mean the CATS and dogs joke?’

Mrs Walker gasped and slammed her umbrella across Mantelli’s face. As he lost his second pair of shades that day, his attacker checked her wrist chronometer and tutted. ‘The children you damaged will be in bed now, if their parents are halfway decent, but you can read this anyway and repeat it on your midday show tomorrow.’

Mantelli blinked as a piece of paper was thrust into his hands. His director shouted in his earpiece for him to get rid of this woman, which was easy for him to say.

‘Well go on then,’ prompted Raymond. ‘Do as the nice lady tells you.’

‘I... I promise not to corrupt young minds with my filthy remarks,’ he read, ‘and I apologize for having done so in the past.’

‘Again tomorrow, right?’

‘Again tomorrow, yes.’

‘Come on then Glynda, mission accomplished.’ The two women strode off, satisfied, leaving Mantelli thoroughly cowed.

‘I think I’ve said all I wanted too,’ said Raymond, laughing out loud as he followed them.

Mantelli stared hopelessly into the camera, his jaw working frantically in silence. His director, finally, had to cut to the commercials. It took ten minutes to restore the presenter’s shattered ego enough for him to continue, and in the meantime each paid advert had to be shown three times.

Raymond caught up with Mae outside the studio, where he dragged her away from a tall blond scriptwriter. ‘He’ll be in there ’til 2000,’ he whispered urgently. let’s do it, while we’ve got the chance.’

When the Doctor woke, he was lying on his back. A cluster of concerned faces hovered overhead and a young man with a ginger

perm waved a sheet of paper in his face. ‘Are you well enough to sign an insurance waiver form?’ he asked kindly.

‘Not more paperwork,’ he groaned. He tried to push the offending article aside, but a stab of pain alerted him to the bullet graze on his shoulder. His left arm had been placed in a sling. His shirt was ripped and his jacket had been removed; it was draped over the robot rabbit, which had not moved since he had lost consciousness. A first aid box lay open by his side and, judging by its wholly inadequate contents, he could only feel grateful he hadn’t been more seriously wounded.

‘It’s a good job I’m used to ducking,’ he remarked.

‘You took one bullet,’ said the ginger-haired man, ‘but you banged your head on the wall too.’

‘I am rather prone to self-inflicted wounds.’ The Doctor sat up and stared at him accusingly. ‘But what sort of company puts real bullets in its prop guns?’

‘You don’t expect us to waste money on pyrotechnics? You shouldn’t have been down here anyway!’

A prim, mature woman with a blue rinse spoke up. ‘You ignored an official warning sign and blundered straight onto the set of *Bloodsoak Bunny* like an imbecile with a deathwish.

You should have recognized Killer Kat, at least.’

‘And I don’t know what you did to the cameras,’ the man said, ‘but you didn’t show up on our safety check. We thought this corridor was empty.’

‘As I said,’ the Doctor muttered ruefully, ‘self-inflicted wounds.’

‘Then if you are quite ready to leave,’ the woman said, ‘we do have three more scenes to film this evening.’

‘Your sympathy underwhelms me.’ The Doctor levered himself up with his good arm. ‘Look after that, won’t you?’ he addressed the rabbit, indicating his discarded jacket. Cleaners were already scrubbing a stray blood stain off the floor behind him, whilst the cat robot’s cowl was being fastidiously straightened. Someone moved in and buffed the rabbit’s chest with a cloth.

Within moments of the Doctor’s departure, filming had restarted.

Raymond was well used to breaking into his own apartment.

In the past, it had been because Mae had locked him out.

Although the situation now was different, he employed his tried and trusted technique.

The door flew open with a crash, and Raymond winced as he extracted his leg from the hole he had kicked through it.

‘You could have been more subtle,’ Mae said as they hurried inside.

‘I wanted it to look like an angry viewer had broken in.

That way, there are thousands of suspects.’

‘Hmmmm. Perhaps we’d better smash the place up then?

Make sure it looks right?’

‘You do that, I’ll get Marston.’

The body was where he had left it, lying under the bed, although it now had one of Zed Mantelli’s shoes in its mouth.

He dislodged it, took a deep breath and dragged the dead weight into the open. In the main room, something smashed; Mae had hurled a ‘Zed Mantelli Fan Club’ mug viciously against the mirror. ‘This is heavier than I thought,’ Raymond called. ‘If you’ve finished playing “bull in a prop store”, you can give me a hand please.’

‘What, touch that thing? No way!’

‘You’re not so fussy with most men! And I don’t know what you’re doing here if you’re not going to help. You might as well go back to your new boyfriend!’

Mae appeared in the doorway and laughed. ‘You know who I love, Raymond. It’s just that Dan’s got a Grade Two apartment, and all you’ve got is an empty cleaners’ cupboard somewhere with your clothes stuffed in it. I’ve got to sleep somewhere.’

Raymond scowled and dragged the uncooperative corpse out into the main room. ‘What’ll you do with it?’ asked Mae.

He noted her use of the second person.

‘It’ll have to go in the disposal unit.’

‘But it won’t fit.’

‘Oh, you’ve tried it?’

‘It’s a hundred metres down the corridor.’

‘Well if someone sees us, we’ll say it’s a malfunctioning robot from *Cricklestone’s Mummy*. Now give me a hand, can’t you?’

Another jagged hole led back to familiar featureless corridors.

The Doctor was almost sorry to be leaving Black Sun; it had obviously once been a better place than the Network. The monotony was soon broken, however, by a row of thirty-two television screens (only fourteen working), with a wraparound headset hung by each. Obviously something for the tourists! The Doctor eyed each monitor with little interest until one caught his attention unexpectedly.

CHANNEL 12, proclaimed the LCD beneath it. BLACK SUN

BROADCASTING.

‘Ah yes,’ the Doctor muttered. ‘ *Bloodsoak Bunny*.’ On the screen, the robot which had left his arm in a sling was hopping about agitatedly, firing bullets into the air. Curiosity, about the programme and the technology, got the better of him. The equipment, after all, was emblazoned with the letters VRTV, and that was one of Angela’s stated reasons for desiring to visit Meson Primus.

The visor fitted easily about his head. For a moment, nothing happened. Then he was suddenly on a battlefield and he could feel the oppressive heat and the mud sliding beneath his feet. He could smell the stench of death and taste the gritty air and the faint tang of blood it left in his mouth. His hearts beat faster as his senses told him that he was no longer on the station.

A canine robot rushed towards him, a cry of ‘Stop!’

bellowing out from behind it. He tried to side-step, mistimed and fell, but the beast carried straight on through him, oblivious to his presence.

The eponymous hero appeared in the mid-distance. ‘You cannot beat me, War Dog. Are you going to come quietly?’

‘I won’t be stopped by no catgone bunny!’ the dog shouted in a hoarse voice.

‘Not even...’ The rabbit produced his rifle with a flourish.

‘The bun with a gun?’ It laughed maniacally and the Doctor yelled as, for the second time that day, it unleashed a volley of bullets in his direction. ‘Gotta die now, Bonzo!’

The visor fell from the Doctor’s face and he was lying in a heap with Firn Kaerson, the Deputy Programme Controller.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ he said apologetically, as he helped the stout man to his feet. ‘I was shot at by a robot bunny rabbit.’

‘It’s only a programme!’ Kaerson said.

‘No, this was a while ago on the Black Sun station.’ He indicated the sling. ‘It’s rather thrown off my balance, I’m afraid. I must admit though, that your Virtual Reality television is very realistic. And without the use of wetware implants, which is even more impressive. I haven’t seen anything so advanced since the Parakon Corporation. Mind you, I haven’t seen such appalling taste in programming since Varos.’

Kaerson was regaining his breath now and he seized the opportunity to launch into what was obviously a favourite subject. ‘I’ve always said that implants are a waste,’ he said.

‘Nature provides the five best routes to the human brain itself, and with VRTV we capitalize on that. We treat the brain as a complex biological computer and use the headset to input programs via laser beam, with the eyes acting as gateways to the system. Total immersion through only one sense.’

‘A sort of electronic hypnotism,’ said the Doctor, nodding.

‘You know, Mr Kaerson, I’ve been wandering these corridors for an hour now, and I think you’re the very man to help me.’

‘You’re not still looking for Paradox?’

‘I am.’

‘Well I’ve come from there myself, and I hope you have a bit more luck than I did getting information from them.’

‘Uncooperative, eh?’

‘You said it.’ Kaerson smiled. ‘But then, I passed Miriam Walker on my way out. She’s just heard about Adam Romance’s spontaneous combustion on Jubilee Towers and she’s gone to give them a piece of her mind. She’ll soften them up a bit.’

‘You couldn’t direct me, at all?’

Kaerson wandered back along the corridor a short way, but frowned as he arrived at the first junction. ‘That’s odd. There’s an emergency bulkhead over the corridor I just came up.’

‘That’s not very odd at all, actually.’

‘Still, you can get there by –’

‘I wouldn’t count on it,’ the Doctor said. ‘But if you could perhaps spare me a few dollars for the train?’ He grinned. ‘I’m even prepared to fill out an IOU form.’

Raymond shook as he and Mae dragged Terry Marston’s body out of the flat. ‘At least the laser cauterized the wound,’ he babbled. ‘We’d be leaving a trail of blood otherwise. Course, that’d get Mantelli in trouble, wouldn’t it? Perhaps we...

Mae?’

‘Oh, God!’ she whispered, and the head dropped with a thud. She was halfway down the corridor before Raymond realized why. There were footsteps approaching. He wanted to run, but his legs would no longer let him. His heart took a lump hammer to his rib cage. Then two forms rounded the corner and he almost wept with relief.

‘It’s the robots,’ he gasped. ‘Those stupid Xyron robots.’

‘The ones that ruined my career!’ spat Mae from twenty metres away. The new arrivals halted and regarded Raymond silently.

‘Forget the junkheaps Mae, we’re still in trouble here.

Come back and help me... hey!’

Without warning, one of the automaton’s chests had uncoiled; a long steel pipe had snapped around Raymond’s waist and he was captured in its grip. ‘Get off me!’ he yelled.

‘Put me down!’ But the robot reeled him inexorably in towards itself and held him tight against its metal body. Then it moved on down the corridor, past the disbelieving Mae.

‘For God’s sake, don’t just stand there!’ Raymond yelled at her.

She tried to drag her fiancé from its grasp. ‘Hey, I beat you on the screen!’ she shouted at the robot. ‘I’ll beat you now, you mean metal bastard!’

‘What’s happening? God, the body, Mae, the body, no one’s gonna miss it where –’

‘Forget that!’ Mae shrieked, trotting to keep up with him. ‘I caught a bit of the news at Sunlink. These things have been grabbing people all day.’

‘And doing what?’

‘I don’t know, I missed that bit. But they’re not taking you to have dinner with them.’

Firn Kaerson had returned to his flat and was playing through his messages with a grimace. The request forms he had left at Paradox were already in the bin. Mantelli left his studio with a headache, and two Private Hospital actors were fighting in a bar.

Giselle sat back and scowled. She had relocated the Doctor, who was heading for the Loop. That was the one route to Paradox that she couldn’t block – at least, not without people noticing. Then she smiled as her screens showed her Hammond, and she reminded herself not to underestimate the women’s resourcefulness. She had anticipated her quarry’s movements and was waiting in the shopping mall, on the highest gallery, her rifle at the ready.

Monitor sixteen caught Giselle’s eye. It seemed that someone was remaking an old-fashioned monster movie, although their Tokyo scenery was appalling, perhaps the least convincing studio set she had ever seen. She wouldn’t have paid it much heed, except that the screen flickered and died and she felt a hot flash of anger at the cheek of it. Why was everybody keeping secrets from her these days?

It had to be connected to Shepherd’s project. When she had a little time, she would bust through his privacy coding for the sake of it. Nobody hid things from Giselle, but nobody. She saw everything, knew everything, and was always in control.

Hammond leaned uneasily against the balcony rail and looked down. Central Mall was huge and circular, built like some vast Roman amphitheatre. Its atrium was devoted primarily to seating for the food stalls lining its circumference, and waiters hurried about preparing for the imminent daily onslaught of tourists. On the higher levels, shopkeepers arranged tawdry gifts and ill-researched books in their window displays. The whole place was offset by a great fountain. Paid for by the producers of *Kartoon Kapers*, it depicted a garish tableau of anthropomorphized animals spitting plumes of water in red, white and blue. An obtrusive monstrosity of commercialism, the shoddily constructed object fitted the shopping center's character perfectly. Hammond's eye was irresistibly drawn to it as she waited, her friend's voice chattering excitedly in her mind.

'I'm not a murderer,' she reminded it every few seconds, but it never heard her words.

I can see him, said the rifle finally, and it bucked in her grasp impatiently. The Doctor crossed the mall towards the elevator, as she'd known for sure he would. Once she had realized that all routes to Paradox were blocked, but for the Loop, she had headed here immediately. It was a little too public for her liking, but at least the tourists weren't around yet and the traders would know better than to talk. An escaped prisoner, resisting arrest. What a shame he had to die. The official report would vanish down a waste disposal unit.

'I'm not a murderer,' she said again, although the rifle butt was on her shoulder and her finger ready and trembling on the trigger.

But you're going to let me do it!

The moment she always hated.

It won't be your fault, I promise you.

Never her fault. She had never killed anyone. She was guilty all the same, a crime of ignorance. Of turning a blind eye.

You only have to let it happen.

All these years she had been Security Chief. For the past two, she'd been receiving orders herself. She had tried to avoid obeying them, but by night, men in masks had roughed her up in a dark corridor, and by day, men in suits had let her know their disapproval of such reckless individuality. She was scared for her job and she was scared for her life, and so she had been letting it happen ever since. It had

been a short step to this. To holding the rifle as its automatic targeting locked onto its hapless prey; as its plastic bulk shifted in her grasp accordingly.

You've always done it in the past.

She didn't have to look. She didn't have to see. She didn't even have to feel.

You only have to squeeze the trigger.

She only had to let it happen.

I won't even tell them you were here.

She wasn't going to kill the Doctor. She was only required to turn a blind eye. She just had to let it happen, had to let the rifle take him. She would sleep easy later, because it wouldn't be her fault.

'Go on then, do it!' yelled Giselle.

She had the Doctor on nine, his would-be assassin on ten.

She cheered as Hammond finally pulled the trigger – and then the cheer turned to an anguished howl as all her screens cut out, grey static replacing her coveted entertainment. She hurled herself to her desk and typed frenziedly at the computer keyboard, but it rejected her commands.

A message was coming in, and although she tried to block it, it was patched through automatically. Jak Martyn again.

She could see from his face that it wasn't good news.

'We've tracked the source of the glitches. The whole computer system has been affected by a series of genetic algorithms. Apparently, they piggy-backed onto a transmission from a Cornerstone crew on Meson Primus.'

'You mean someone's doing this to us on purpose?'

'Not quite. The malfunctions we've been experiencing are a side-effect of the algorithms' probing of the system. They've been sent for a specific purpose, which I think is to –'

The computer cut the link without being told. The hiss of static ended and Giselle swung around hopefully. Nine of her monitors were back

on line. Three more were showing nothing. The remaining four displayed a jumbled array of characters, produced seemingly at random. As she watched, a pattern slowly emerged, the same string of six letters appearing repeatedly on the four screens.

'KRLLXK', the letters said, six hundred times over, scrolling past her worried eyes.

She wasn't in control any more.

Six

aria jogged down Main Street, making no effort to hide hersel

M f. What need was there for subterfuge? Direct confrontation was the only way to end this.

Ten blocks ahead and seventy feet above, the lizard creature bellowed its rage. Light glinted off razor fangs as its saliva described a colourful arc over the village. Maria squeezed her right hand around the blaster, its plastic butt comfortable and reassuring in her palm. Her skin dripped beneath the padded armour of the Time Agents, but that was small price for its protection.

Nothing could hurt her. In stories like this, no one died.

There was only the thrill of the hunt, the excitement of battle and the pride of certain victory to come.

Maria was having the time of her life.

'What the hell was that about?' blustered Raymond. He stared at the Xyron's departing back, unable to believe it had simply released him. 'I thought it would... I mean, I don't know, steal my body or something.'

'Oh, darling,' Mae laughed, 'they only did that in the series. I suppose these prop robots are programmed to walk on set, grab an actor and drag them out of shot. Which is what that one did.'

'But it shouldn't be doing it now!'

'Then something's up with its programming. I wouldn't worry.'

'"Wouldn't worry"?! Mae, that thing –' Raymond caught her

expression. ‘Oh God, the body! Quick!’

They set off at a run, Mae hanging back so she could disappear if things backfired. They were outside Mantelli’s flat – their former home – in under a minute.

‘It’s gone!’ Raymond shook more than he had ever done, and Mae could do nothing to calm him as he paced back and forth across the corridor. ‘That’s it, somebody’s found it, taken it away, they’ve –’

‘Come on, lover boy, they can’t have moved it already.’

‘Then show me it!’ screamed Raymond. ‘Show me where it is, because I’m sorry Mae, I don’t see a corpse, just empty floor where someone’s been here and picked the damn thing...

picked it... oh, no!’

‘The other Xyron,’ Mae said, calmly.

Raymond paled. ‘It could be anywhere.’

Hammond raced back to her office, the rifle screaming in her mind: *You pathetic weakling, you’re dead now!*

‘Not if I can help it.’ She kicked the door open, half-expecting an ambush. Her mind whirled with a hundred thoughts and images. The Doctor, framed in her sights. Her finger on the trigger, the voice in her mind. The moment of truth, the deliberate jerk upwards. The traders in panic, her target fleeing, the scorch mark spreading across the far wall like a cancer. She had never tried to stop it before, just always let it happen. ‘Well it won’t happen again,’ she said.

Don’t be so selfish, what about me?

She had to clear her mind of this, to pull herself together.

Her life was in danger, she had disobeyed orders. But she had always known this was coming and she had prepared for the eventuality. She could get herself off the station before anyone realized what she’d done.

At least, she hoped so.

‘No use waiting out there,’ Lucinda shouted from the Programme Controller’s office. ‘We’re not letting anyone in.’

She paused to think, then added: ‘Except your news teams, and then only one at a time.’

Firn Kaerson frowned. ‘Jon wants the office tonight, does he?’ He looked uncertainly at the scene on monitor four. ‘It doesn’t look as if they’re moving.’ The occupiers had piled six heavy chairs against the inward opening door.

‘He’s meeting the President of Leena in an hour,’ Giselle said, seething inwardly, ‘and he did specifically state that these people should be cleared out by then.’

There was no time for this. Hammond needed attending to, the Doctor was alive and missing, some undefined threat was about to hit the station head-on and there was nothing she could do about any of it with Kaerson breathing down her neck. If she had known how much was about to happen, she wouldn’t have brought him here.

At least she had been able to put Brookes onto one problem. ‘The Security Chief has gone rogue,’ she had said.

‘She refused to carry out a… mission.’ He had known the routine.

It had been like giving a wolf permission to play in the sheep enclosure.

Stuart Revell peered over grey plastic railings, his forehead wrinkling in puzzlement. ‘It’s like Newer York up here.

There’s a woman gone past who looks like a refugee from a super-hero movie.’

‘Towards the monster?’ Stuart nodded. ‘Not a woman, then. Perhaps a giant mutant lemming.’

Stuart rejoined Grant at the bottom of the steps. The town planners had been unable to afford a subway system, so they had built fake access points instead. The tunnel in which Grant cowered ended in a brick wall five feet in. Like the Campaign to Speak Japanese and the move for compulsory kimono-wearing on November’s Culture Day, it added nothing to Neo Tokyo’s authenticity. More importantly, it offered scant protection against the possibility of a monster attack. But the planners could hardly be blamed for that.

‘The streets are almost empty.’

‘Well it’s not surprising, is it?’ said Grant. ‘Most people will be hiding under beds or trying to dig through the barrier and run. I know I would, if you didn’t insist on staring at that thing!’

‘Come on, we put a dozen blocks between us and the monster, it’s not following. I don’t even know why we’re hiding.’

‘It’s because I don’t want to get stamped on by a massive great dinosaur!’

‘I told you, it’s not doing any stamping! It’s standing there, thrashing its head about and growling. I don’t even think it’s damaged anything.’

‘Yet.’

‘Well it’s hardly what you’d call a rampage, is it? It’s not spitting fire or eating people or anything.’

‘I suppose not,’ said Grant. ‘Then what’s it doing here?’

‘That’s exactly what I want to know,’ said Stuart.

‘So go and ask it. I’ll stay here in case it doesn’t answer politely.’

‘So how about the barrier?’

Grant sighed at his friend’s persistence. ‘How about it?’

‘It must connect to Godzilla and the super-hero somehow.

Perhaps we should inspect it?’

‘You won’t be happy until you get to play Sherlock, will you? Okay, the barrier sounds safest.’

‘You won’t regret this, Watson.’

‘I might not live to,’ muttered Grant.

‘Danny, darling, are you leaving?’

Mae utilized her ample frame to block the doorway. ‘Wish I didn’t have to,’ Brookes grunted. ‘Been called out on special business.’

‘Oh, honeybun, what will I do all night?’

He grinned lasciviously. ‘I’ll try to get back quick, but the Controller asked me out on this himself. Could be up for promotion.’

‘And a Class One apartment,’ Mae deduced, eyes sparkling as she brushed dust from her new friend’s tunic. She might stay longer than she’d planned! That was, if Raymond didn’t pull himself together. She loved that man, but she wouldn’t risk poverty for anyone.

Brookes pulled away, as if he’d just remembered something. ‘I thought you were with *him* tonight.’

‘Don’t say it like that, sweetheart. Raymond’s like an injured puppy since I left, I feel sorry for him. And I had to go and explain about the new man in my life.’ Mae pressed herself against Brookes’s chest and dragged his arms around her. It was like cuddling a frog. ‘Besides, he’ll be paralytic by now. He lost something... precious, and went off to drown his sorrows. As usual.’

Brookes sighed and pulled a set of keys out of the multitude that hung from his belt. ‘Here. Go in. Make yourself at home.

I’ll be back soon as I can.’ He gave her a rare smile and nuzzled his knuckles against her cheek. ‘Then we can celebrate together.’

‘Oh, darling,’ Mae gushed. She gave Brookes an exaggeratedly affectionate wave as he left.

Then she flopped down onto his sofa and tried to stop herself from being sick.

‘Hello in there. This is Mr Kaerson, Deputy Programme Controller. I wondered if we might talk?’

Giselle studiously ignored the distraction. She concentrated on her computer, experimenting with typed commands to which the software always answered ‘KRLLXK’.

‘Now I know you’re upset about your programme,’

Kaerson was saying into the comlink.

‘Then why cancel it?’ Lucinda’s tinny voice challenged him.

‘I... well, I don’t know, that wasn’t up to me. It was quite popular, wasn’t it?’ Giselle rolled her eyes.

‘And it made a lot of money,’ said Lucinda.

‘Yes, I liked it actually.’

Giselle scowled and typed ‘HELLO.’

The computer returned: ‘YOU DIE.’

‘I’ll talk to the Programme Controller,’ Kaerson said. ‘I’m sure we can compromise.’

‘We want a new producer too,’ came a male voice from within the office.

‘WHY?’ Giselle tried.

‘ORGANIC BUGS MUST BE PURGED FROM THE SYSTEM.’

She sat back, almost physically rebuffed by the stark simplicity of the threat. This could be more serious than she had anticipated.

‘Do you, erm, want the Xyrons back?’

‘For Heaven’s sake!’ Giselle exploded. She checked herself as Kaerson’s eyebrows rose in surprise. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Kaerson, but the Programme Controller categorically said that he was not bringing *Timeriders* back. He said it was “cheap, childish and deeply embarrassing”.’ The words, in fact, were Giselle’s own. She had coined them when, on her own authority, she had arranged for the Meson Broadcasting Service’s most profitable product to be cancelled. ‘Science fiction,’ she assured the younger man, ‘isn’t popular.’

‘Well…’

‘Why don’t I pass a message to the Programme Controller when he gets here? I’ll tell him you did your best but that the lunatics in there won’t move. We can wait until they’re starved out.’

‘I should stay until he arrives, perhaps?’

‘No!’ Giselle thought quickly. ‘He said that, once you’ve finished here, you’re to go down to the Wolf Extension. The properties people are discussing strike action and that could affect our profits.’

Kaerson groaned. ‘I’ve been working for sixteen hours!’

Giselle gave him her sweetest expression. ‘I’m sorry, but he did talk about “having your guts” if you didn’t sort it out.’

Kaerson bustled out of the office and Giselle sighed with a relief similar to that of having a rotten tooth pulled. As the door shut, she turned immediately to her real work. The computer still shone it's message at her: 'ORGANIC BUGS MUST

BE PURGED FROM THE SYSTEM.'

She shook off the chill which enveloped her and pretended that she wasn't worried.

Maria wasn't worried. She could see the monster above her, its stubby forearms thrashing uselessly as it roared its defiance to the world at large. One huge scaly foot was rooted to the ground, mere metres from her hiding place. She primed her weapon, took aim and held her breath.

When Maria fired, the gun's recoil sent a tingling shock of excitement through her system. The blast shot seventy feet upwards, impacting hard against the green giant's head. Damn it, she'd missed the eyes! She aimed again.

But then she realized it was looking at her, its red gaze burning into her skull. Its foot lifted high off the ground and it took one heavy, ponderous pace towards her, almost squashing her flat against its instep. She had gotten its attention.

That was when Maria started to worry.

Hammond's door burst open a second time, and Dan Brookes stood on the threshold. 'I'm sorry, ma'am, my orders are to take you in dead or alive.' His rifle was aimed at her head. 'To be honest, I'd prefer dead! Move and I'll shoot you!'

'I'm not moving,' said Hammond quietly.

Brookes seemed disappointed. 'I'll shoot if you do,' he reiterated.

Hammond sighed. 'Which is why I'm not going to, please do try to understand.'

Brookes scowled and his trigger finger trembled. 'I might do it anyway.'

'You do that,' said Hammond. 'But look what's on my desk and look where it's pointing.'

Brookes looked. Hammond's telepathic rifle lay across the table between them, aimed almost casually at his groin.

'If I die, my last thought'll be "Give it both barrels!"'

Hammond smiled – and, as the somewhat distracted Brookes edged nervously to one side, she dived for the concealed switch on her desk's underside.

Brookes's eyes widened and his face fell comically. The rifle fairly leapt into Hammond's grasp. 'What's wrong, Danny? Your own super-advanced gun just told you about the remote cut-off I installed in it? The one I just activated?'

Brookes nodded dumbly. 'I thought it'd be you who came after me.' Hammond crossed the room, her weapon trained on his heart. 'Start praying, Danny boy.'

Dan Brookes closed his eyes and whimpered. When he was least expecting it, Hammond turned the rifle round and cracked its butt across his head.

Mrs Walker yelled as the maintenance man leapt in front of her. She had been only vaguely aware of his presence; he was unpicking a *Timeriders* poster from a fake window and she had nodded approvingly towards him. Even so, within a second of his lunge, she had him pinned against the wall with her umbrella in his stomach.

The Doctor groaned and congratulated her on her swordsmanship. 'It's you!' she exclaimed with disgust. 'The jester! I suppose *Horror Mansions* taught you to creep up on defenceless women like that.'

Behind her, Glynda nodded sagely. 'You're probably right, Mrs Walker.'

'I was testing my new disguise,' the Doctor said, as the umbrella was removed and he dusted down his denim overalls.

He adjusted his blue cap to a jaunty angle. 'A masterful deception, though I say so myself. Admit it, you didn't recognize me, did you?'

'Well, considering your inappropriate attire when I first met you, no.'

'Aha! You see, I wear that jacket for a reason – beyond my impeccable taste in matters sartorial, of course. Believe it or not, people don't tend to memorize my facial characteristics on a first meeting. Good, eh?'

He gave Mrs Walker a friendly mock punch in the shoulder. She slapped him across the face.

‘Come on Glynda, we’re wasting time with this imbecile.’

She tried to move off but the Doctor blocked her path again. This time, he caught the inevitable umbrella swing midway. His expression was suddenly earnest. ‘I gather you’ve come from Paradox. I’m headed there myself’

‘And?’

‘And I thought you might give me some details, you know, layout, personnel, that sort of thing.’

‘Then you’ve probably been watching too much *Masterspy*, young man, because I do not work like that. Good day.’

‘But…’ A smile of innocence spread across the Doctor’s face. ‘I am hoping to get one of their programmes cancelled.’

Mrs Walker stared at him, searching his eyes for a flicker of dishonesty. ‘Well,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘I imagine I might spare you some time, in a good cause…’

The ground shook as Stuart and Grant reached the barrier, the tremor prompting renewed screaming from those who were trying desperately to claw through it. Across Neo Tokyo, vibration-sensitive alarms rang and whooped their misinformed warnings. ‘I thought you said it wasn’t moving,’

Grant quavered, staring over his shoulder.

‘I did.’

‘Well it’s started now!’

‘Never mind that, we’re here.’

‘So I see, but it doesn’t look like anyone’s had much success getting out.’

‘We’re not trying to get out,’ said Stuart, ignoring Grant’s suggestion that he speak for himself. ‘We’re here to investigate.’

‘What’s to investigate?’

‘Well, does the barrier go all round town, for a start?’

‘I think we can assume so.’

‘And over?’

Grant shrugged. ‘There was no moon tonight; with all the lights around here, I can’t tell whether that’s sky or barrier up there. Oh, for an aeroplane on this planet!’

‘Then how about under?’

Grant looked at him. ‘We could tunnel our way out,’ he realized. ‘No, it can’t be that easy. Besides, someone must’ve tried –’ He jumped, distracted by the monster’s renewed baying. It seemed uncomfortably closer.

‘Come on,’ said Stuart. ‘Let’s see what there is to dig up.’

Maria ran for her life, the useless weapon forgotten and hanging limply by her side. Neo Tokyo shook around her as the giant’s footsteps hit the ground with force. At one point, its head swooped downwards from the heavens, its terrible rows of triangular teeth snapping together and missing her trailing leg by centimetres.

She stumbled in the water gardens in the centre of town.

She was on her back, three inches deep in brackish fluid, fragile flower stems crushed beneath her weight. The monster reared above her, fluid dripping from its mouth, hungry eyes fixed upon this fresh morsel. It was still now, prolonging the agony, knowing she could run no further. Its tail flicked in anticipation, demolishing three buildings in its wake. Its right leg moved upwards, hovering over her head.

Maria screwed her eyes tightly closed and trembled. She was ready for the ultimate fate. Ready for teleportation.

‘It knocked down three buildings!’ squeaked assistant director Morris. ‘I don’t believe it, it knocked down three buildings!

Who made that tail movement?’ He jumped around the control room like an agitated flea. The technicians tried to ignore him and to concentrate on their own vital tasks.

‘Foot steady, ready for downward push.’

‘Prepare retrieval.’

Morris paced nervously and sweated profusely. ‘I could get Mr Shepherd back, he might spare a minute –’

‘Target locked, timed sequence activated. Engage servo-motors, drop foot.’

‘Teleport in five. Four…’

‘– he’ll know what to do. These faults, all this trouble –’

‘Impact.’

‘– hope he won’t blame…’ Morris tailed off, aware that total silence had descended. His staff, to a man, were pale and staring.

‘What’s wrong?’ he ventured.

‘The teleport,’ said one, finally. ‘A glitch in the program. It kicked in too late.’

‘Which means?’ Morris knew what it meant. His heart prepared for a major terror leap and his nerves for an imminent panic attack.

‘It means we’ve brought home one squashed and dead contestant.’

The Doctor located the Paradox office on Gaslight Promenade.

‘If only you knew how long I’d been looking for you,’ he told the shiny gold plaque in which he checked his disguise for the final time. He adjusted the cap to cover his eyes and slung an empty holdall over his shoulder (his right shoulder, that was; the left wasn’t yet recovered, although his recuperative powers had enabled him to lose the sling). He had obtained both, along with the overalls, from an unlocked store room. Well, it had been unlocked when he had finished.

The reception area was bright and well furnished. It was also empty, which tempted the Doctor to walk straight through. He didn’t wish to be caught intruding, though. Best to pass himself off as a legitimate visitor. Miriam Walker had warned him that the offices were busy. They were obviously in full swing on their new project.

He rang the bell on the reception desk and waited for attention, his eyes straying to six gilt-framed photographs on one wall. The company’s producers, Dominic Shepherd amongst them: a well-dressed, thin-faced man with brown hair tied back in a pony-tail which seemed inappropriate for one of his advancing age. The Doctor

took an instinctive dislike to him. Well, his eyes were too close together!

He tried the bell again, three times. ‘The receptionist has left,’ said the harried-looking, colourfully dressed man who finally pelted into the room. And we’ve a crisis. Come back tomorrow, please.’

‘This won’t take long.’

The man had already turned to leave, so the Doctor launched quickly into his cover story.

The Loop train passengers gave Brookes a wide berth. He liked that, it made him feel powerful. No one was laughing.

He spent the journey by the door, watching people hurry to alternative exits to avoid walking past him. At intervals he loosened the power pack in his new rifle, then slapped it back and watched them all jump. He had come a long way since school.

It had all been his parents’ fault. For the DaRe family to christen their youngest son Daniel showed a near criminal lack of foresight. The surname was pronounced as two syllables, but that didn’t stop playground taunts. Dan had had to become stronger than his tormentors, to rub their faces in the ground and shut their lying mouths up. He found he was good at it, and thus graduated into a career where bullying aptitude was a job requirement. He had changed his name by special licence in his first week here, putting the jibes behind him. People respected him now.

He should have issued an alert. That’s what he had been told by the Programme Controller (or his PA, but that was the same thing). But he had a score to settle and anyway, he wanted the kudos for this job himself. He’d have Hammond’s rank off her, as well as her life.

He knew exactly where to head when he disembarked at Carlton Crescent. He had found her on the monitor in her own office. It was stupid of her not to have realized that, though she was probably panicking and thought he’d be out longer.

She had ducked into a store room, no doubt to stay until the heat was off. No cameras and little chance of interruptions.

She was in for a shock.

He located the door and, pressing his ear to the keyhole, heard

laboured breathing like the panting of a cornered fox.

She had shot the lock out with her rifle, no time for subtlety.

She would be sitting, that same gun aimed at the door, ready for anyone who dared come through it. She thought she was clever. She thought she had all angles covered.

He yanked the door open and leapt aside. A volley of fire slammed out. Four, five, six, power exhausted. He grinned and stepped into the opening. She was there, fumbling with a fresh pack, tears staining her cheeks. She knew it was over. Just in case she didn't, he told her so. His finger squeezed the trigger.

She managed finally to push the pack into place.

He snarled: 'Die, you bitch!'

Then Brookes laughed as Hammond's blood hit the walls and stayed there. People weren't laughing now.

'Here!' Grant called. Stuart rushed over eagerly. His friend was crouched by the barrier, brushing soil off what appeared to be a metal mushroom. 'Someone dug this up,' he said. 'It was right below the surface.'

'Pull it out, let's have a look.'

'I can't. It's held down, and not by the soil.'

Stuart moved in for a better view. 'What is it?'

'Some type of machine. Look, four little buttons on the top.

They're sealed under a plastic coating though, I can't get to them.'

Grant had cleared enough dirt away so that the device was practically hovering. 'It's suspended in a force field,' Stuart said. 'If it's not responsible for the white wall, I'll eat my CPU.'

'There's probably a few more,' said Grant, 'all the way around the barrier.' He climbed back to his feet. 'At least Godzilla's quietened down, for now.'

'You know, if these mushroom things are keeping the barrier in place, and yet they're inside it...'

Grant concluded the syllogism for him. ‘Then whoever put them here is probably still in Neo Tokyo.’

Stuart nodded, his expression grave. ‘That’s what I was thinking.’

Lucinda paced, pausing every few steps to wipe sweat from her forehead. Colin and Mike sat in sullen, uncomfortable silence. George was getting more water from the drinks machine. They all tried to ignore the screams and sounds of laser fire from Mary’s handheld video player.

‘I can hardly breathe,’ said Mike finally. ‘How long’s this going to last?’

‘I don’t know!’ snapped Lucinda. ‘The cameras should be here by now. Perhaps they’re interviewing the Programme Controller about the inconvenience we’ve caused. They’ll probably be in here soon.’ She looked doubtfully at the pile of chairs against the door.

A shout from Mary’s direction broke the silence. ‘We’ve walked into a Xyron ambush!’

‘Do you have to have that rubbish on?’

‘It’s my favourite, “The Xyron Invasion”. We’ve just reached the monster that looks like a gigantic –’

Roderick cut her off with a snort. ‘It’s the one where Mae Jordan gets all the lines, isn’t it?’

‘So what’s wrong with that?’ said Mike.

‘She’s hopeless, that’s what. She couldn’t play a tree without being too wooden.’

‘Who cares?’ said Cohn. ‘She’s got a great pair of knockers!’

‘Oh, that’s typical of you,’ said Lucinda in disgust.

‘What if no one wants to get in here?’ said George, suddenly. They all looked at him. ‘Well, I can’t see any work around,’ he expounded, indicating the empty desk he was perched on.

It took a while for that to sink in. ‘Perhaps the Controller’s off sick or something,’ said Mike. ‘Or he might have knocked off for the day, it is nearly 2100.’

‘Then we wait until he comes back.’

‘No way,’ said Colin. ‘It’s boiling!’

‘This is no good if we don’t stick together.’

‘Forget it then, I’m going.’ Colin strode towards the door and pushed the chairs out of his way. Lucinda tried to stop him but he knocked her aside.

‘He’s right,’ said Mike. ‘We’re missing the *Death-Hunt* recording anyway.’

‘Who wants to see that mass market fodder?’ argued Roderick.

Colin uttered a loud expletive. ‘It’s locked!’

‘You what?’ cried Mike.

‘Okay, no one panic.’

‘Oh no,’ said Colin, ‘we’ll just stay here ’til we suffocate!’

Lucinda loosened her collar and mopped her brow again. ‘It is a little hot,’ she admitted.

Silence fell once more, and this time only the fizz of George’s aspirin in his glass disturbed it.

Giselle wasn’t watching. For once, she wasn’t watching anything.

She had spent the time since Kaerson’s departure running systems checks and sample programs on her computer. She had discovered some alarming things. By the time Jak Martyn presented himself at her desk, she knew as much as he did.

‘I’ve been trying to call you but the comlink’s down,’ he said.

‘I know. A dozen other systems too. Whatever’s tampering with our computers, it means trouble.’

‘Is the Programme Controller around?’ Martyn asked hopefully.

‘No, he’s...’ Giselle faltered. What was the point in her elaborate hoaxes now? ‘... not!’ she concluded. ‘But I can help.’

‘You?’

‘This ship of yours, it isn’t going to collide with the station, is it?’ Martyn shook his head. He seemed surprised by her change of attitude, more so by the knowledge she displayed.

‘You were right, the malfunctions are a side-effect. If our computers weren’t networked so haphazardly, it’s unlikely we’d have experienced half of them. These genetic algorithms are custom-designed for one purpose: to find, isolate and operate the docking bay controls.’

‘I’ve got every engineer working to purge the system and keep that ship away,’ said Martyn. ‘I’m confident they –’

‘They can’t. I’ve tried it too. If we’d identified the problem sooner, maybe... but we didn’t. We’re locked completely out.’

She sat back. There was nothing she could do now, only watch as numbers streamed across her screen unbidden.

Martyn stood uneasily by her shoulder and the room was stifled by an expectant hush.

‘It’s happened,’ she said finally, and it was almost a relief.

‘The docking bay is now open to space and that ship is on a perfect approach. So much for being derelict, there must be somebody aboard it!’ She turned to Martyn, who was shaking.

She controlled her own nerves with an effort. Deadpan, she announced: ‘We’re about to receive a visitor.’

‘I’ve been trying to contact you for half an hour,’ Shepherd said. ‘What’s happening here?’

Morris scuttled after his boss like a panicked beetle. ‘All our comlinks are down sir and the monster’s acting up too, we even –’

‘Yes, I know what you “even” did, Morris. You managed to lose one of our contestants.’ He strode into the control room, pausing in the doorway to watch technicians tremble in his shadow. ‘Now, who can tell me what’s gone wrong?’

‘Computer problems sir,’ one woman answered nervously.

‘Full systems check, immediately.’

‘But –’

‘I don’t want to know how you solve them, just do it before we have another compensation claim on our hands. While you’re at it, wheel the robot out, get this show over with.’

Morris balked at the suggestion. ‘Are you sure that’s wise, sir? I mean, if the computer –’

‘Damn the computer! I am not losing ten billion dollars worth of programme because of a few incompetent programmers.’ He turned and swept out of the room, with Morris hurrying once again behind him. ‘Another thing: why did I have some stupid woman shooting at me five minutes after start time? You hadn’t even sent the monster in!’

‘Ah, Jenny, yes,’ said Morris. ‘She asked around, found out about Network Systems and put two and two together.’

‘Contestants with brains now. You really have screwed up!

Did she get back alive?’

‘Your light gun triggered her armour’s teleporter as planned, sir. She’s waiting in the studio for Hal’s discussion segment.’

‘Fine. Well if anyone else looks for Professor Nebula in the next ten minutes, they’ll be disappointed. I’ve work to do.’

‘But the show, sir, you said –’

Shepherd halted in the doorway to his office. ‘It can do without me for the time being. I have to use my monitors to find some idiot tea boy who knows more than is good for him.’ He slammed the door in Morris’s face, deliberately.

Then he turned and finally registered the intruder’s presence.

‘Hello there.’

‘What on Meson Primus do you think you’re doing here?’

‘Is there a problem?’ asked the Doctor, cheerfully.

Brookes relaxed in Hammond’s office, his booted feet on her desk, her finest scotch whisky disappearing down his throat. It was his office now and his desk. And his hangover in the morning, but who cared about that? His vision blurred and he thought he saw the number 6 dance across the room. He blinked and dismissed the hallucination. Hammond’s blood stained his shirt and felt so wonderfully wet and

clinging that he thought perhaps he'd never scrub it off. Let those who crossed him see it! He hurled the empty bottle at the bin, but it dissolved midflight. He blinked again and rubbed his eyes.

His desk turned into letters: ERROR 44357, as though that should mean something to his alcohol-befuddled brain.

When it finally hit him, it was like a punch to the guts. He screamed, ripped the VRTV goggles from his head and he was face-down on the office floor, no blood on his shirt, no scotch in his bloodstream, no notch on his belt. He would kill Hammond for this. Kill her again!

She couldn't have anticipated the bug which had tipped him off so soon. If he hurried, he could still turn dreams into reality. He located her on the monitor in seconds. She was heading towards the Wolf Extension and running past the Cornerstone offices. She sat in the refectory and was taking in the tour. She lurked outside Firn Kaerson's room, but watched the *Variety House* rehearsal.

She was everywhere. Laughing at him!

She was heading for the shuttleport. If she could sneak aboard the tour group's bus, she could hitch a lift to Nostralia, settle down with a new identity. It was all set up there: the documents were in a strongbox, along with clothes and hair dye. She could disappear without trace.

It was funny; she had always treated VRTV with disdain. A sad toy for the sad rich, a drug for the ivory towers of Meson Primus. She had never donned the headset with which her office came equipped. But she had seen its potential none the less, and a simple reprogramming job was sparing her from an unpleasant death now.

Then Brookes's gruff voice sounded over her comlink, like a judge pronouncing a death sentence. 'Chief Hammond has gone over the side. She is to be located and taken out of action with extreme prejudice.'

I said we should have killed him!

'No options now,' she muttered. She couldn't believe this: how had he worked it out so soon? This was Dan Brookes after all, whose IQ was a running joke at security get-togethers. The only man who, on a station where forty per cent of people had had their names changed, had chosen to make his less interesting. The butt of a thousand jokes, a constant source of laughter. The man now threatening her life.

Even he could not be stupid enough to leave the port unguarded. The docking bay too would be covered; little chance, then, of stealing someone's personal craft. 'It's the back-up plan. Looks like I need you after all, mate.'

I was sort of hoping for this.

'I guess I was as well.' She changed direction and broke into a trot. She still had a chance. She had programmed enough false images into the cameras to keep Brookes busy for a week.

She only hoped that none of the more intelligent officers got lucky.

Suddenly, there were two behemoths on the Neo Tokyo skyline.

The second had come from nowhere: a towering robot, of burnished gold and crimson. Its angular body glistened in the light, its face a collection of impassive slits and its voice clipped and precise, booming from tiny but powerful speakers.

'Destroy all monsters!'

Grant was whimpering and closing his eyes against the apparition. He clawed at the barrier as if he could dig through it with his fingernails. The screams of the villagers had started up again, and Neo Tokyo shook once more as the robot moved towards its green-skinned foe. 'Destroy all monsters!'

'What's wrong?' yelled Stuart, grabbing Grant's shoulder and pulling him around. 'Not the robot thing again?'

'I can't help it, I can't stand them!'

'You can't stand anything. But this one seems to be on our side.'

Grant forced himself to look. The titans were face-to-face now, sizing each other up. He jumped involuntarily as the metal giant repeated its cant. Then a thought occurred to him; so great a one that, in working its way about his mind, it pushed his natural fear momentarily aside. 'It's Network!'

Stuart looked at him. 'I should have realized. We can stop this if we go there.'

The mechanoid lifted one huge arm and gripped the lizard creature by the neck. The reptile squealed in pain as it was shaken from side to

side, then it broke free and swiped its head against its foe's metal chest. The robot took a step back, repulsed, and its synthesized voice reaffirmed its purpose.

'Destroy all monsters!'

Or rather, as Grant now recognized:

' *Dehstawreeawlmuhnsterz.* '

'How did you get in here?' Shepherd demanded.

The Doctor put on his most engaging smile. 'Oh, the usual.

I told your receptionist that you were adamant I came and fixed your vending machine immediately.'

'You did what?'

'Well, I'm committed to my work. I cannot stand the thought of a faulty appliance left unattended.'

The Doctor turned back to the machine, but Shepherd crossed to him in two strides and knocked him aside. He slapped his palm against the dispenser's touch-sensitive surface and rapped: 'Water.' A glass of clear fluid appeared in the collection port. He took it. 'Malfunctioning, you say?'

The Doctor knocked the glass from his hand. 'That could be dilute hydrochloric acid for all you know. Best leave this to me, sir.'

Shepherd spoke with the tone he reserved for children, imbeciles and Morris. 'You haven't even brought any tools!'

The Doctor didn't falter. 'Only one infallible way of fixing Earth machines.' He gave the device a hearty punch and something gurgled within. He smiled at Shepherd hopefully, but the producer plucked a gun from his pocket.

'I suggest you tell me why you're really here,' he said.

Then a steaming jet of black coffee shot from the vendor and struck him in the face. He screamed, dropped the weapon and the Doctor ran.

He didn't get far. He yanked the door open and ran straight into Raymond Day. 'Sorry'm late, Doc,' the new arrival slurred. He leaned

against the Doctor drunkenly, forcing him inadvertently back into the office. ‘I see you got the bastard then!’

The Doctor turned. Shepherd was on his knees but the gun was back in his hand. He opened his mouth to speak, but Shepherd fired and the blast struck him in the chest. ‘Three times in one day,’ he said faintly. ‘I think that might be a record, even for me.’

He collapsed, unconscious.

There was nothing anyone could do.

The bay doors were stuck in the open position. The computer override had crashed and the bay was itself sealed so that manual access was impossible. Martyn had detailed a technician to burn her way in, but even with the most sophisticated laser torches, it would take her upwards of an hour.

Outside, a ship which all instruments said was derelict fired up its engines for a second, altering its bearing microscopically.

Martyn watched the computer read-outs anxiously whilst Giselle tried to establish a video link, to at least see what was happening.

Then, at last, the moment they had been dreading came.

‘It’s in,’ said Martyn quietly. Their ‘visitor’ had boarded.

The bay doors closed again.

Somewhere, a young woman called Angela was screaming.

Seven

n the past ten minutes, Martyn’s opinion of Giselle had gr

I own a hundredfold. She had worked expeditiously at the keyboard, tapping in commands and executing self-written subroutines which made even him, a computer engineer of no small repute, quite jealous of her aptitude. The rogue programs, she explained, had gained access to the cameras.

She had now circumvented their influence. They were hers again.

As one, her monitors blacked out. She picked up her VRTV

headset and wrapped it around her eyes. A moment later, the pictures changed and Martyn realized what was happening.

She had linked herself to a flying camera in the docking bay. It had been lying face-down on the floor, but it now lifted as she guided it with her mind. The blackness fell away, zooming out to give a composite bird's-eye view spread across all sixteen screens.

The bay was a welcoming place, well-cleaned and lit, decorated in restful pastel shades of brown and yellow. It was the most expensively maintained part of the station – bar certain executive flats – offering as it did a first impression of the Network to visiting ship-owners. Those who, like Martyn, came and went via bus received a very different welcome at the shuttleports.

Giselle's camera swooped low over the pink craft of Miriam Walker, its CATS logo displayed on the roof above the red painted message: FIGHT AGAINST FILTH. It banked past the Programme Controller's enclosure in which, to the best of Martyn's knowledge, his ship was secured. Then it located the intruder, a little way inside the doors to space.

At first, it seemed like nothing out of the ordinary. Martyn had been able to work out most of the ship's details from the radar image: an Earth craft, an old one, having departed the parent planet two score years before. Its journey had left deep scars. Its contours were obscured by fungus grown from clinging spores. Where the black and white livery of the Terran Security Force was visible, the paintwork was battered and flaking, and the port side engine housing was dented irreparably. Martyn couldn't help but marvel that it had gotten so far with such damage. The skill needed to compensate for those handicaps and still bring the ship in on a perfect approach was phenomenal.

Then Giselle zoomed in the camera lens for a better look, whilst still keeping the device itself high and out of sight. The resolution improved and all technical matters were pushed abruptly from Jak Martyn's mind. There was something on the vessel's back, crouching darkly amidst the spreading growths.

Something which could, evidently, survive the rigours of travel in a vacuum unprotected. At first, it seemed almost mechanical. A hulking shadow of machinery, perched like a squat bloated pupa on the hull. But its surface was in constant motion, giving the impression more of a metallic ant colony.

A little closer and he could see that it was a single entity. It was indeed mechanical, but it seemed alive too, like some incredible living metal. Its surface area ebbed and flowed and reconfigured endlessly. Circuits closed, switches tripped, programs adapted. He had not seen anything of its like before.

Giselle removed the headset, shaken and disgusted as if she could not bear to have been near it even as a cyberspace image. ‘That’s our visitor,’ she whispered with a nod towards the screens. ‘This *Krillzik* thing.’ They stared together in silence. The creature was motionless, clinging to the ship’s back. Then abruptly, six spidery black tendrils whipped out from its seething mass and spanned the length and breadth of the bay to bury themselves in its thick walls.

‘And we’re about to find out what it wants.’

The strident beeping of the comlink woke Mantelli from a nightmare in which an irate audience attempted to fling him from an airlock. His head pounded as he answered, blanking the visual image so that he wouldn’t be seen in disarray.

It was the Sunlink team. Things were happening on the station: rumours of an imminent collision and an alien monster. They had cleared space for emergency broadcasts through the night and that, as if he needed telling, was his job.

No rest for the weary and humiliated!

He dressed sullenly, ordering a root beer from the vendor and receiving a black coffee instead. He stared into the cup with bloodied eyes. Either his intruder of the night before had damaged it, or the machine was somehow telepathic. It’d be dispensing aspirins next! He drank the potion anyway, then he keyed into the access terminal. Might as well see if his first viewing figures were in yet. Probably about five hundred considering the debacle that his first day had been. He called up the audience report menu, but the computer didn’t respond.

It had crashed, as surely as his life had. He was about to turn it off when something unexpected happened.

A bird appeared, its plumage black and white, complete with popping cartoon eyes and huge grinning beak. It shot across the menu with animated zeal, slicing through it in sections, devouring its contents voraciously, leaving the screen empty in its wake. Mantelli frowned, shook his head and didn’t pretend to understand.

He switched the monitor off and left.

The shopkeepers were turning off their lights and pulling metal partitions down in front of depleted window displays.

Ged and Richard paused by the atrium's vulgar fountain and looked up through the gloom at Central Mall's four higher tiers.

'I wonder why it's empty?' said Ged.

'We should run up there, see if we can get Lucinda a *Cricklestone's Mummy* shirt before they shut.'

'I suppose the tour group have passed through.' Ged checked his chronometer. 'It's 2100 – they're probably on their way to the recordings.'

'I suppose they only stock them in human sizes though.'

Ged sighed and tried to ignore Richard. Sometimes, he didn't know when to turn the jokes off. 'We'd better find them,' he said, making a decisive move across the mall.

'Hang on, what about Dragon-Breath?'

'She's probably there already. Colin and Mike won't want to miss *Death-Hunt*.'

'I suppose not.'

'They must have gone down here.' Ged pointed to a rickety wooden sign, on which a cartoon hand pointed the way 'TO

THE STUDIOS'. It was obviously there for show more than anything – he recognized it as a prop from *Wally of the West* –

but it would serve none the less.

They had barely started down the branch corridor when suddenly there was someone before them. A huge, short-haired woman in a fawn uniform, a sneer of disdain on her face. 'Where do you think you're going?'

'The Freak!' Richard whispered, awe-struck. Ged frowned.

'Stand on the white line!' the woman ordered, whipping a pair of leather gloves from her pocket and pulling them deliberately onto her hands.

Richard stood, staring, and his left leg began to shake. She moved towards him and he almost dissolved as she reached out... and passed straight through her target. Suddenly behind him, she put a hand to

her forehead, looked faintly bemused and wandered off in a daze.

'A hologram!' said Ged. 'From that prison programme of yours. What's making it act like that?'

'I don't know,' said Richard as the light image disappeared into the mall. He sounded disappointed.

The computer-controlled lighting in Brookes's apartment dimmed.

Mae frowned. She didn't remember that ever happening before. For that matter, she didn't remember the Network's computers ever being as unreliable as they had been today. It seemed that minor problems were plaguing her wherever she went, from the body-snatching Xyrons to a faulty thermostat in her favourite refectory.

Sitting there in the darkness, it occurred to her for the first time that the malfunctions might be symptomatic of a larger problem. Her brow furrowed as she reached for the comlink.

She had gathered the home numbers of many top executives over recent years; she had spent nights in many of their apartments and, for that matter, many of their beds. A few calls to the right people would doubtless tell her what was going on.

'We've been forgotten,' Mike complained. 'They've locked us in here and thrown the key away.'

Colin scowled at Lucinda. 'Stupid cow, we're missing the *Death-Hunt* recording now!'

'Okay,' said Mary, placatingly, 'there's no need to ram it down her throat.' She giggled and looked around for applause.

At that moment, something silver and spherical plunged from the ceiling and bounced off the desk, causing a startled George to leap to the floor. Mary's comment about balls dropping was lost in the ensuing babble.

'There're two more of the things up there,' Lucinda said. 'I hadn't noticed.'

'Flying cameras,' said Roderick, although they all knew that. 'They saturate the Network, recording all that goes on here.'

'They're watching us!' exclaimed Lucinda. 'Which means we haven't

been forgotten after all.'

'They're playing psychological games,' Roderick guessed,

'waiting for this difficult situation to damage morale and fracture our group cohesion.'

'Then we'll show them that it can't,' said Lucinda. 'Up for a song, anyone? *Two, three, four…*

Jak Martyn had been persuaded to return to engineering and see what he could do from there. Giselle was alone again, as she had wanted. She sat back in her chair and realized that, for the first time she could remember, she didn't know what to do next. The thought made her feel cold, and her numbed brain fought to come to terms with this new, unpleasant reality.

The Krllxk thing was expanding through the computer network. It was taking information, drawing it into itself, unmindful of the side-effects that would have. The engineers were trying their best, but the outcome was inevitable. Her seat of power was doomed. Now there was just one pleasure left to her.

The tour group's shuttlebus was still in port. The station held ten escape pods, each of which could carry fourteen people. The docking bay, and all the personal craft within, was unreachable. Even if Martyn's lot could cut through to it – and they were still trying – there was no telling what that creature would do to them. There were currently over twelve hundred people on the station. She would have to eject an empty pod to perpetuate belief in the Programme Controller's presence.

That left only half that number able to evacuate. Adequate escape facilities cost money and the Network therefore didn't have them.

Giselle turned to her comlink with a sigh. Then, as she punched in the first number, a smile forced itself across her face. Her reign here might be ending – but she would have the time of her life deciding who lived through it and who died.

Raymond dodged Dominic Shepherd's second shot not by agility but rather because he fell over before it reached him.

He rolled instinctively under the producer's desk and cowered there. A flying camera dropped down from the ceiling to watch, and Shepherd cursed and flung his blaster to the floor.

‘Okay, you can come out Raymond, I’m not going to shoot you.’

‘I’m not here,’ Raymond murmured indistinctly.

Shepherd sat down, cradling his head in his hands. His weariness soon fermented into anger and he punched Giselle’s number into the comlink. She seemed distracted as she appeared on his screen.

What is it?’

‘That job we paid you for. It’s lying unconscious on my office floor.’

‘I haven’t time to –’

‘We had a deal, Giselle! It’s bad enough you let him get here in the first place. The least you can do now is dispose of him in a way which leaves me out of the picture.’

‘Look, I’m sorry Mr Shepherd, but –’

‘Never mind “sorry”!’ Shepherd thundered. ‘Just get him…

hey!’ Giselle had terminated the link. He tried to re-establish it, but she wouldn’t take his call. Raymond’s face appeared uncertainly over the edge of the desk. He looked distinctly pale, as if he was going to be sick at any moment. ‘I tell you what, Raymond,’ he said, ‘we had a script meeting after this afternoon’s misfortune. We decided that the only way to go from here is to write off the last episode as a dream sequence.’

‘So?’

‘So there is still a place for Adam Romance – and for you –

in *Jubilee Towers*, if you want it. And if you can keep quiet about a certain… unpleasant incident.’ He indicated the Doctor, sprawled untidily on the carpet.

Raymond followed his gaze. The Doctor had been good to him, he had intended to help him. But then, how well did he really know him? If he was heading for a fall, then why should he take Raymond along too? He looked back at Shepherd, whose face was contorted uncomfortably into the most honest, open expression he could manage. ‘Is he dead?’

‘Not yet.’

He decided not to think about it. ‘What about my contract?’

‘We’ll negotiate. You might find me very flexible.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ He was tempted. His appearance on Mantelli’s show hadn’t been quite everything he’d hoped for.

His agent hadn’t been in touch yet and there was no guarantee he would be. Besides, he could do with Paradox’s legal clout should a certain corpse ever come to light. He enjoyed the idea of the hold he now had over Shepherd. ‘Get me off this charge, or you’ll find yourself on a similar one!’ He liked it.

‘Okay,’ he finally said out loud, ‘you’ve got a deal.’

‘Good. I’ve decided how to handle our other problem, too.’

Shepherd put a call through to one of his assistant directors (not Morris – he could never be trusted with something this important). ‘Send two runners to my office. Someone who can be discreet.’

Raymond hauled himself into a padded seat facing the desk. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’m going to rid ourselves of some incriminating evidence and cause our competitors a good deal of grief into the bargain.’

Raymond smiled and spied a decanter of whisky on the producer’s desk. He made a grab for it. ‘I’ll drink to that.’

‘How long are you going to be?’ complained Grant. Stuart had been working away at the digital locking pad on the front entrance of the Network building for ten minutes now.

‘Nearly there,’ he said. ‘It’s a complicated system though.’

Grant shook his head. His gaze alighted upon a large stone on the sidewalk, and a moment’s thought brought an idea to his head. ‘Get out of the way,’ he told Stuart, bringing the rock up and hurling it hard through the door’s inset window. An alarm siren began screeching, but as Grant pointed out, it was lost in the clamour of so many others. He reached through the broken pane, disengaged the locking system from the inside and pushed the door open.

Somewhat deflated, Stuart followed him into the building.

Grant was on familiar territory here. The young men raced up two

flights of steps (too charged with adrenalin to wait for the elevator) and along a labyrinthine series of thickly carpeted corridors which smelt of stale coffee and static electricity.

Six rows of state-of-the-art Peregrine computers awaited them in the main office area. Grant rushed to one and greeted it like an old friend, booting its desktop program up with practised ease. Stuart hovered, trying to edge his way to the keyboard, but Grant wasn't letting him intrude. He called up information from throughout the system and Stuart could do nothing but sit and watch him.

'What are you looking for?' he asked impatiently.

'The program which controls those monsters. It's being run from here and transmitted to them somehow. If I can break into it, I can crash the system and paralyse the things, maybe even bring the barrier down at the same time.'

Stuart frowned. 'Are you sure about this? I watched that lizard thing: it had saliva, its skin rippled, you could see its muscles tensing. It'd take a program and a half to handle all those variables. There's nothing that could do it.'

'Not on New Earth, no. But it was possible on Old Earth, even before the colonists left.'

'Who told you that?'

'I read a lot before I came here. This place is ten times better than Agora, but there's still a long way to go.'

Stuart didn't speak for a moment, but then the frustration of being reduced to a spectator's role began to rankle and he resumed the conversation. 'If you're so hot on technology, and Agora had none, then why the robophobia thing?'

Grant shot him a quick look, sorry to have brought the subject up. 'Agoran folk tales,' he answered reluctantly.

'What, metal bogeymen? Evils of progress and all that?'

Grant nodded but said no more. Stuart watched a while longer, then stood up and began to pace. 'Where's all this VR

stuff they're working on?' he asked.

‘Second door left. It’s electronically sealed though.’

‘No problem.’ Stuart flexed his fingers. Something to do!

Whilst Grant continued his investigations oblivious, he began to work on a second locking pad.

Almost three hundred people were packed into the studio audience. They were squeezed onto rows of red plastic chairs which were narrow and painful to sit on. A warm-up man assailed them with an endless barrage of jokes, none at all funny. *Death-Hunt 3000* was about to begin.

‘I can’t see Lucinda and the others,’ said Ged, craning his neck to search the crowd. ‘I wonder if they made it?’

‘Never mind them,’ said Richard, digging him in the ribs.

‘Look at those two blokes on the front row!’ Ged sighed and wondered whether George’s migraines were catching. He tried to stop worrying, and turned his attention to the studio set. It looked so much smaller in real life.

The scenery was all reds and silvers, made to appear futuristic. Its stark, clean lines drew the eye towards six kilometer-long tubes, protruding from the back wall into what seemed like open space (actually, the view was a holoscreen projection, as anyone who knew anything about relative air pressures would no doubt deduce). Six spindly tracks ran parallel from the front of the studio to each tube, and on the near end of each sat a silver- painted capsule shaped to hold one human form in repose. Partially hidden in the wings stood the pinnacle of the Network’s technological achievement: the Marston Sphere, named for its late creator, forty feet in diameter, wrapped in reflective foil and resembling nothing more than a huge metal golf ball.

Someone cheered as the warm-up man departed, then the whole crowd burst into vigorous applause as presenter Nik Calvin bounded onto the stage and waved to audience members that he didn’t know. Calvin was one of Option-8’s most popular celebrities; his temptingly contoured body, his almost unfeasibly handsome face and his sparkling grin with its attendant set of white, unblemished teeth added up to a host who looked too perfect to be true. ‘And welcome,’ he said, after an immaculately timed pause, ‘to the new series of *Death-Hunt 3000*.’ When the commotion had died down, he introduced the first four combatants.

‘We had to sedate a couple of them this time.’

The floor manager nodded but didn’t look up from his clipboard. ‘Sling ’em there, someone’ll take ’em to the capsules in a minute.’

Two tremendous roars came simultaneously from the frontstage area. One was the audience, but the louder was reigning champion Anjor declaring his intention to ‘mince butt’ once again.

The floor manager looked down at the final two contestants, both drugged and unconscious. There was one he didn’t recognize: a curly-haired man in overalls. Last-minute replacement, he decided. He must have signed the consent forms or he wouldn’t have been brought here. Someone always tried to back out when it was too late.

It had taken a long time to get rid of Raymond. It had taken a good deal of whisky, an impatient ear for an outpouring of drunken gratitude and finally, a large amount of insistence that he should let the nice man show him to his new flat. Shepherd was not pleased then when, two minutes after being left in solitude at last, he was interrupted by Morris’s rather explosive arrival.

The assistant director was agitated, but that was nothing new. He was shaking and frightened, which wasn’t too unusual either. He had swapped his sweat-drenched green shirt for an equally offensive lurid orange one, but Shepherd had learnt to ignore such monstrous lapses of good taste. ‘The robot’s in sir, and the programme’s nearly over. Thing is, some of the contestants don’t know what to do. They’ve found the pieces of the time inverter and most of them have given up attacking the monsters. We need Professor Nebula there to finish it.’

Shepherd buried his face in his hands. Why had he ever agreed to this stupid role? ‘Look, Morris, you’ll have to send someone else in. Put them in some spandex, make them look like a real super-villain.’

‘But we’ve filmed you –’

‘Shooting down a contestant! Not good publicity, considering what happened to the other one. Now, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m busy. There are two little boys running around Neo Tokyo with information I can’t afford to let them keep.’

‘What can they do?’

Shepherd sighed. ‘Grant Markham is a very capable programmer, considering the planet he lives on. He has a lot of potential and more

curiosity. His friend... well, to have broken into our computers as he did, he must be better. Even if they don't ruin everything now, they can cause a lot of problems for me once this episode is in the can.'

'What difference will it make then?'

'This project is coming in at several billion dollars over budget, Morris. The whole point of setting up a company on New Earth was to make up some of that deficit by selling VRTV technology to the plebs. We didn't count on them being as industrially developed as the common or garden tadpole. I've spent weeks downgrading our equipment to make it compatible with their television system, and I haven't finished yet.'

'So?'

'So we'll need someone to stay at Network Systems until long after we've taken the Marston Sphere down and moved on to better things. That means we can't have anyone running around who can implicate the company in their monster problems. Now have you any more stupid questions, or do you think you can see to the recording?'

Morris nodded dumbly, his eyes glazed over. Shepherd groaned. 'What I'm trying to say, Morris, in layman's terms, is this: sod off. I'm busy!'

This time, Morris understood and, looking affronted, he hurried out of the room. Shepherd rubbed his eyes and turned back to his monitor. Using the cameras with which Neo Tokyo was now saturated, he hoped to find Markham and his friend before they could do any more damage. His scans, so far, had turned up blank. But then, a none-too-pleasant thought occurred.

He ran a quick check of the computer system and his fears were confirmed. Somebody had accessed one of the terminals in Neo Tokyo's Network building. He would have to move fast.

Grant gave a yell of triumph, and was vaguely disappointed when he saw that Stuart wasn't there to hear it. His friend might have had the advantage of being born with this technology, but Grant prided himself on having a more logical mind and on being able to work through any problem eventually. He knew now why he had been unable to find the monster control programs before: they weren't on the Network files at all, but rather in a separate but interlinked system somewhere else. He had managed to negotiate a gateway through to this, and the plethora of information now flooding onto his screen could only be one thing.

‘Scratch one lizard, rust one –’ He shuddered. ‘– robot!’

Concealed behind the *Death-Hunt* sphere, Miriam Walker and her assistant awaited their moment. All six contestants were in the capsules now, transparent plastic shields locked over them.

To Mrs Walker’s disgust, the last two bodies had been carried in comatose, and although it was difficult to tell from this angle, Glynda was sure that one was the Doctor. ‘Don’t worry dear,’ Mrs Walker had said, ‘there’ll be no one entering that sphere tonight, I guarantee it.’

They waited as the ‘lucky seat numbers’ were called out.

Eighteen thrilled spectators gambolled down onto the set and were fitted with VRTV visors, connecting them directly to the participants’ minds. They were shuffled off to a corner and Nik Calvin returned, flashing his tombstone teeth again.

‘Now, ladies and gentlemen, it’s the moment you’ve been waiting for, as we start off the silver capsules and send our six contestants into the *Death-Hunt* sphere, from which only one of them can –’

‘Hold it right there!’

There was a low moan from certain quarters as Miriam Walker strode into view. She hooked her umbrella around Calvin’s neck, dragged him towards her and snatched the microphone from his grasp. ‘Now I know you’ve all waited a long time for tickets to this,’ she addressed the audience, ‘but I want you to think about the type of programme you are supporting by your presence.’ She spoke louder as the dissenting voices became more numerous. ‘I’m sure none of you would want your children to watch this, and I’m equally positive that you would not like to be attacked by an armed delinquent who feels, thanks to *Death-Hunt 3000*, that murder is somehow socially acceptable.’

Glynda took the mike from her. ‘That’s absolutely right,’

she said, and handed it back.

Mrs Walker wanted to say more but someone had reached the sound mixing desk and her voice was no longer being amplified. Calvin had been handed a second microphone.

‘Well folks, it’s up to you. Do you want this programme stopped?’

He was answered by unanimously outraged shouts and hisses. Mrs Walker turned crimson and attempted to shout above the uproar. ‘What your audience want is not the issue. I am talking about what they should be allowed to have!’

The offended mass drowned out her speech. Then shouts turned to cheers as a pair of security men jogged onto the stage and seized the intruders. ‘Take your hands off me, you ruffians!’ Mrs Walker yelled. ‘Have you not got better things to do than harrass innocent old women?’

‘As a matter of fact,’ snapped one officer, ‘yes. So move it!’

‘What are we going to do, Mrs Walker?’

She didn’t answer. She was seething with barely contained fury as, to a tremendous round of applause, the two women were dragged out of the studio.

Stuart could hardly believe his eyes. For that matter, his other four senses seemed to be lying too. A moment ago, he had been in a small dusty room, looking at three decidedly low-tech consoles, each with a leather padded chair before it. He had seated himself at one, experimented with a few switches and been delighted when a screen flared into life.

Now, thanks to a pair of wraparound goggles which looked like something out of a cereal packet, he was standing in that screen image: a corridor in a tower block, where two people were arguing fiercely. He could feel the badly plastered wall by his side, he could smell dogs and urine and he could taste the oxygen-rich atmosphere of a planet he had never before visited.

So this was Network’s new VR system! It was incredible, like nothing he had ever experienced. It wasn’t interactive though, as he discovered when he tried to question the squabblers. It was like watching television, but from closer than usual.

He ignored the action, concentrating instead on the remarkable detail. He stood at a window, running his hands over the glass and along the hard wood of the surround. It was an obvious fake. A summer scene was painted behind it, a bird poised suspended between two trees. Such carelessness seemed at odds with this miraculous equipment.

Then the scenery rippled and he ducked as something flew at him. For a second, he thought the bird had come to life. This one was different

though: black and white, a magpie unless he missed his guess. Not a real one either, but a computer sprite, a cartoon facsimile with huge eyes. He turned to follow its flight as it shot back and forth across the corridor. It was eating the world; its walls, its windows, even the characters, all giving way to a black void. This couldn't be part of the program! Maybe a software protection device?

He reached for the sides of his face and tried to pull off a headset that he couldn't feel. He fumbled and the bird turned as if seeing him for the first time. It backed up a few inches, hovered, grinned across its yellow beak and swooped...

Stuart screamed, but the scream turned into a racking, blood-choked gurgle.

Grant was there in seconds, kneeling by his side, already knowing it was too late. He ripped the headset from his friend's face and recoiled at his eyes, wide and staring, behind it. A trail of saliva trickled down Stuart's cheek, dampening the carpet. Grant checked for pulse, heartbeat, any sign of breathing. Ice water pumped its way around his veins.

A shadow fell over him and he cried out, twisting round, backing into the room, facing the newcomer with legs shaking, face pale, mind racing, trying to deny that Stuart Revell was dead.

The new arrival was Dominic Shepherd.

Firn Kaerson found Miriam Walker slumped against a corridor wall, her knees to her forehead, her spectacles discarded by her side. He was going to hurry past, in the vague hope that she wouldn't see him. But she looked so pitiful that he sat beside her instead.

'Are you all right?'

She looked up. He noticed that her eyes were red-rimmed from crying. Her voice was tired and melancholic. 'Six times now I've been arrested. Six times my assistant has been imprisoned, whilst they've released me for fear of making me a martyr.'

'The Campaign can bail out Glynda though, surely?'

'With an effort. Another charity raffle, perhaps. I don't know if I have the spirit. I'm tired of losing battles, fighting to even have my views acknowledged.'

‘Then,’ Kaerson ventured, a distrustful eye on her umbrella,

‘perhaps you should accept the evidence? Give up?’

‘Do you like the Network’s output, Mr Kaerson?’

‘Well, not much of it…’

‘But?’

‘It’s what the viewers want, the figures prove it.’

‘An endless diet of snuff game shows, so-called childrens’

programmes like *Bloodsoak Bunny*, heroes who use guns and fists over intelligence and deduction – not just on one programme but again and again. You immunize the vulnerable to the consequences of violence, portraying it as sanitized and normal and as a necessary part of life.’

‘When you put it like that…’

‘But that’s the problem, isn’t it? I have my organization, but what’s that to the media? TV, books, newspapers… they belittle me, stereotype me, exaggerate my stand and hold it up to ridicule. They’ll do anything to stop people from taking me seriously, because they might just have to change if that happened. How can you fight something fairly when it has such power?’ Her eyes teared and she looked away. She seemed embarrassed.

After a minute of awkward silence, Kaerson reached to her.

He slipped a comforting arm around her shoulders and was surprised to find that she didn’t stop him. ‘I think you’ve got a point,’ he told her softly.

Then, to the astonishment of both of them, they embraced.

‘On your feet!’ ordered Shepherd. He was holding a gun – and not the toylike affair from before, either. Grant ignored the instruction anyway.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ he spat. ‘Can’t you see that Stuart’s dead?’

Shepherd hadn’t seen, but it seemed obvious now. ‘What…

was he doing?’ He was by Grant’s side in seconds, pulling a squat, torch-like object from his pocket. It buzzed as he waved it over the

motionless body, a stream of numbers flashing across a small screen on its top.

'He was trying your VR equipment!'

'I don't understand it. It's like his mind just shut down – or his brain disintegrated.'

Grant let out a strangulated sob, then jumped up and kicked the older man in the ribs. 'This is your fault! You caused this!'

Shepherd scrambled back to his feet and tried to fend off Grant's flailing arms. 'It wasn't me who broke in!' he shouted angrily.

'But you put the barrier up and brought the monsters here!'

Grant pulled away from him and ran. He didn't get far.

Shepherd grabbed him by the neck. 'That's it, you're coming with me.' Then one of the VRTV monitors exploded, peppering the producer's face with glass. Grant bit his hand and pulled free, escaping from that claustrophobic room at last. Shepherd followed, and as he pounded down the drab corridors, Grant realized with a dreadful certainty that he was gaining.

He ducked into the staff kitchen area. By the time his foe confronted him, he had the reassurance of a carving knife in his right hand. He was breathless, unaccustomed to such exertion. Shepherd faced him, blood seeping through the thin cuts on his left cheek. He didn't say anything, just fixed him with that look of his. Grant tried to stare him out but his head was aching and his arm was spasming and the next thing he knew, Shepherd was across the little alcove and holding his elbow tight, twisting, loosening his grip so that the knife dropped to the floor.

Held in a painful headlock, Grant was forced out into the main office, by the terminal he'd been using only minutes before. There was something on the monitor: a bird graphic, black and white, tearing across the programme displayed, leaving blackness in its wake. Shepherd saw it too, and grabbed a radio device from his belt. 'Two to beam up, straight away!' he snapped, then added in a mutter: 'I don't believe I said that.'

Grant's credibility was even more stretched though, when after a brief shimmer and a half-second of stomach- churning emptiness, he found himself somewhere completely unfamiliar.

Six pods had been ejected already. The seventh and eighth were filling rapidly. Giselle's chosen were evacuating, and the less favoured didn't even know.

'Mr Williams? It's Giselle here. We're bailing out and the docking bay's off-limits. Pod H, ten minutes, if you value your life.'

'An evacuation? But we haven't got –'

'I know. That's why I thought you'd appreciate being one of the first to know. Keep quiet about it, won't you?'

Williams nodded quickly and broke off the communication.

On monitor twelve, Giselle could see him hurrying around his apartment, flinging clothes into a travel bag. Like the others who survived this, he would owe her an enormous favour.

When it came to starting a new career on Meson Primus, she would be sure to collect from all of them. She punched a fresh number into the comlink and waited for the next potential ally to acknowledge. Then a cartoon magpie shot onto her computer screen and she jumped back, alarmed, guessing only too accurately what this meant.

She saw her precious files, displayed as strongbox icons, dragged onto the desktop whether they wanted to be or not.

The bird shot from one to another, teasing strings of information from them like worms from wet mud and growing steadily more plump as it ingested its rich diet of knowledge.

She spent the next few minutes emptying her desk and planning her own escape. She needn't bother going back to her flat. She spent little enough time there anyway, and her only personal effects were those business suits she would no longer be wearing. She took one last, lingering look at her home of the past twenty years. She would miss it dearly. Then as she turned to the door, it was kicked open from without. A lithe form hurled itself into her office and Giselle squealed and dropped her executive briefcase. Hammond's blaster rifle was pointed squarely at her chest.

'Don't you dare move, or we'll kill you!'

'W-we?'

'I said "I". *I'll* kill you!'

She could see that she meant it.

Powerful music thumped out, studio lights dimmed and the *Death-Hunt* capsules moved steadily, gaining momentum, urged on theatrically by Nik Calvin and by the enthusiastic audience. As they reached the six tubes, their speed increased exponentially. They surged forward, their lines blurring, then rippled and vanished into the game zone. The sphere skated across to take center-stage, obscuring the now empty cylinders. The contestants would already be within, hunting each other through the over-sized interior. Those who weren't lucky enough to be hooked up to the VR equipment would follow their exploits on screens, stationed either side of the globe. The thrill was in being here.

Then suddenly there was a blast of cold, fetid air, a bang like a thousand balloons bursting, a horrible wet smack and a smell like iron and burnt ozone. Hysteria erupted, blood soaked the back six rows and people began to die horribly.

Eight

hen the Doctor awoke, he was lying cramped in a W claustrophobic pod, staring through a plastic shield at harsh white studio lighting. His chest ached, his Peace Keeper-inflicted wounds aggravated by Shepherd's blaster. He could also feel some drug in his system: he had been sedated, to keep him out longer.

He heard a voice, muted by his sealed environment, dulled yet further by the spinning of his own head. Shouting, over-excited, talk of spheres and contestants and... what was that name again? *Death-Hunt 3000*! The original application of the Marston Sphere. He wished he had questioned Kaerson further about the show.

The capsule shuddered and moved, the lights above him blurred and vanished and he knew that he was being thrust feet first into a tunnel. His chest tightened as his speed increased and he was flattened by the G-force. Everything flashed into white-dominated negative and he could feel the sickening lurch of teleportation. Then the sky above was red, the pod jerking into sudden but surprisingly cushioned deceleration.

Like Earth's transit technology, he thought, installed during the first pushes of intergalactic colonization, outlawed soon afterward. But what matter that where Network profits were concerned?

He only appreciated how stuffy his transport had become when its plastic lid hissed open and sweet, damp, fresh air hit his nostrils. He felt momentarily nauseous, but he could not indulge such symptoms. If the game rules were as he imagined, there was no time to be lying here. He levered himself over the rim and dropped onto ground which was soft, wet, black and artificial. The sky was equally fake. It had to be, if he was inside a Marston Sphere. Trick lighting, an angry background to evoke angry emotions; a blood-red swell conveying an apposite image to viewers hungry for violent catharsis. Great gnarled black trees punctured the atmosphere.

Below, thin mist fingers camouflaged dirty brown scrub bushes, restricting sight to a hundred metres in each direction.

It was like a cartoon fantasy land: *Gloomy Wood*, thought the Doctor. He wasn't surprised that, even within his limited field of vision, there were five cameras.

Something yelled at him to 'Duck!' He was still looking for the source of the warning when a great white bird swooped. It almost caught his eye with a vicious peck, and he was carried to the ground by the force of his belated dodge. The bird screeched, circled and took aim again. He pulled off the cap which came with his maintenance overalls, hurled it with devastating accuracy and caught the creature on its second attack run. The cap landed neatly on its head, removing its sight and orientation so that it slammed headlong into a tree. It plummeted from the sky with an uncomfortably pain-filled squawk and the Doctor chose to run before it recovered.

There were obviously dangers here beyond merely those of his competitors. One opponent had been felled already, but he would have to outlast four more to escape this game. He wondered how he knew all that. Then he noticed the earpiece, a circular chunk of white plastic jammed into his right lobe.

Some form of scaled-down VRTV, using his ear as its genetic gateway, inputting a limited amount of data. The information had come from that, an ongoing status report beamed directly into his head. It had been responsible for the warning, too. He sensed three people wearing full-size equipment, sharing his experiences and urging him onwards mentally. Too late, he understood that they were warning him again.

Something grasped his ankle and he reeled, falling a second time, entangled in part-organic, part-mechanical tendrils: machine-augmented plant roots, pushing through the mud, gripping him and

dragging him inexorably downwards. His legs disappeared and he pedalled frantically, treading slippery earth, forcing his head to remain above the surface. A root slipped around his neck and squeezed, cutting blood off from his brain and precious air from his heaving lungs. Still struggling vigorously, the Doctor was drawn underground.

The *Death-Hunt* studio had become a charnel-house, smelling of blood and sweat and fear. The audience surged outward, weeping and yelling, expecting swift death at any moment.

More than one had been sick, the first to succumb having sparked a chain-reaction of uncontrollable vomiting.

Ged strained to hold his own stomach in check, crushed by the weight of others, striving to keep Richard in sight. Just keep moving, escape from it all, ignore the piles of strangers lurching, falling, trampled by an unheeding, terror-driven crowd.

An Option-8 executive was shouting to be heard. 'Please don't panic, there is no danger. Those injured, stay behind and medics will attend to you. The rest follow me, we'll return you to your shuttlebus.'

'What's wrong?' somebody else mocked, with a cruel raucous laugh. 'You came to see some death, didn't you?'

Someone elbowed Ged accidentally in the face. He clutched his bleeding nose and struggled onward. *Just keep moving, don't give up and die.*

When Kaerson's emergency pager had directed him to the nearest comlink, it had initially been but one more source of irritation. 'Disaster at 0-8,' the Programme Controller had said, with unusual abruptness and in a voice which seemed strained. 'You've failed me enough today, Kaerson. If you can't handle this, I'll have you jettisoned from an airlock!' At least, he had thought, he'd found an excuse to flee Mrs Walker, to buy time to consider what had happened between them. But she insisted on accompanying him, and to the considerable surprise of the Option-8 crew, they arrived in the *Death-Hunt* technical center side by side.

'What's going on?' rapped Kaerson, taking charge immediately in a way he had never done before.

The floor manager seemed relieved to see him. 'A dozen bugs, throughout the system. We shot six capsules into the sphere, but one

never got there. It arrived in the back row of the audience, still doing one hundred kilometres per hour.'

'My God, that's awful,' whispered Mrs Walker. Kaerson expected her to add some diatribe about the inherent evil of the game-show format being responsible for the tragedy. He was relieved and impressed when she didn't.

'What's the casualty rate?' he asked, slipping out of his tunic and rolling his shirt sleeves up. 'Is anyone –?'

The floor manager halted him. 'Twelve dead, more critical.

But we've got medical teams working on it. We need you here sir, we don't know what might go wrong next.'

'You should abandon the programme.'

'We can't do that!' protested Nik Calvin who, until this moment, had been silent, apparently shell-shocked. 'Do you know how much money has been spent on this already?'

Kaerson was studying a bank of monitors. On five, he could see the remaining *Death-Hunt* competitors (a nearby screen was ominously blank). Four more displayed computer data. He and Mrs Walker identified contestant #5

simultaneously. He was standing unsteadily, brushing at the caked mud on his overalls.

'The Doctor!' they cried in unison.

'That man shouldn't be in there,' said Kaerson, accusingly.

Calvin failed to grasp the point. 'You're right, he should be dead. The computer retracted its tangleroots and freed him.'

'Then at least some of your malfunctions are beneficial,'

said Miriam Walker, frostily.

'Get him out of there,' snapped Kaerson. 'Now!'

'He signed a consent form,' the floor manager insisted.

'Can you produce it?'

‘Well…

‘We’re bringing him out, and the other contestants too. In the meantime, I suggest you find the paperwork for all of them, or you will be in serious trouble.’

‘But the programme –’

‘Damn the programme!’ shouted Kaerson. ‘Do as I tell you!’ The little man hurried away. Calvin stayed, but seemed too cowed to protest. Kaerson had never acted so authoritatively: it occurred to him that the change was due to Mrs Walker’s influence, but he didn’t know what to think about that. He seated himself at a console and stabbed out the sequence which would teleport the Doctor to safety.

It didn’t work.

Perched high in brittle branches, wooden axe shaft cradled in his sweaty, bloodstained palm, an unsuspecting quarry below.

Anjor lived for moments such as this.

He had learnt his fighting skills in the Academy on Gluton, practised them in its underground passages and honed them in the wrestling rings and gladiatorial stadia. When he had tired of the showmanship and fakery inherent in those professions, he had turned to gunrunning, not for money but for risk and thrills and battles and death. When the Network had announced the new Option-8 *Death-Hunt* game, Anjor had put his name forward without hesitation. The waiting list had been long and it was the fourth series before they asked him to compete. He won in record time and had repeated that accomplishment twice since. He was a multi-millionaire from prize money, but to him that was inconsequential.

The waiting lists were shorter now. Finding contestants was becoming a struggle. No one wanted to face Anjor. This morning, they had asked him to make this tournament his last.

They would retire him from the show, furnish a fresh vehicle for his talents: introducing contests of strength, young hopefuls with ability but no courage for the ultimate challenge.

His response had been to sever the messenger’s head with one punch. They never understood. This was his true vocation. It wasn’t about the money and it wasn’t about stardom. It was about moments like this.

His victim wore blue denims, some type of cleaner's uniform. A curly-haired man, soaked in mud, breathless and advancing slowly, warily, through the sucking dirt. He would be in position in seconds.

Anjor sucked his fingers, enjoying the taste of his last kill.

The woman had been no contest. Strutting in leather armour with her whips and chains, all show like the Glutch wrestlers.

When the real danger started, she had panicked. She had panicked and she'd died, and he had enjoyed feeling her life ebb as he squeezed it from her throat. Tough on her! The sphere was always more dangerous than they thought. And so was he.

His quarry was directly below him. Anjor hated to attack from behind, so he let out a bloodcurdling cry as he dropped.

He wanted to let his enemy know that he was dead.

The Doctor reacted instinctively when he heard the yell. He rolled so that, instead of landing on his shoulders, the attacker hit his side and both tumbled. It was Anjor who came out on top, his hands pressed tight around the Doctor's throat. 'No offence pal, just winning!'

'No offence,' croaked the Doctor, delivering a sharp rabbit punch to the side and bringing a knee up into his enemy's groin. 'Just fighting back!'

He struggled from beneath the winded warrior. Anjor wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and laughed. 'Not many can do that. A challenge, at last!' He hefted the wicked looking axe which, thus far, he had not tried to use. The Doctor couldn't help but feel he was being generous. A challenge? Not judging by those bronzed, rippling muscles.

Anjor had obviously trained extensively. He revelled in the trappings too. He wore a purple leotard on which the letter 'A'

had been stencilled in red Gothic script. A water pouch and a bag of stones hung from a knotted rope belt. His blond hair was streaked across with scarlet dye and, like his beard, had been allowed to grow to shoulder length. The whole image was deliberately unnerving.

'I'm Anjor, warrior champion of Gluton. Remember the name. It's the name of the man who killed you!'

‘With cowardly weapons?’ the Doctor retorted, playing for time.

‘One weapon allowed per competitor,’ Anjor snarled.

‘What’s yours, weakling?’

‘My brain,’ said the Doctor.

Anjor sneered and leapt. The Doctor side-stepped, the axe’s stone head whistling unsettlingly close. On the second swing, he dashed forward instead. The wooden handle caught him a glancing blow to the arm and it hurt, but he had closed the distance. He tackled his foe around the midriff, knocking him against a tree. The bark crumbled under their impact and he felt something hard beneath it.

Anjor rained punch after punch down on the Doctor’s shoulders. The Doctor applied more pressure to the ribs.

Grunting, his foe broke free of him and he brought his head up in a savage jaw butt. Anjor lashed out, caught his stomach and he fell, receiving a kick to his side on the way down. He was grovelling at the warrior’s feet, grasping his leg to stop his foot from being employed again. He could see the stone bag over his head and he reached for it, but Anjor snatched it away. That at least gave him time to stand.

‘You wouldn’t win without that axe,’ he panted. ‘Where’s your honour?’ Goading him into a hand-to- hand fight might not necessarily be life-saving, but it would give him some sort of a chance.

‘Who needs honour? Only winning matters!’ Anjor swung the axe again, and it was all the Doctor could do to keep out of range. He was backed up against the same tree he had knocked his opponent into, and he ducked as the next lunge came. The axe head embedded itself in the trunk and the Doctor seized his opportunity. The warrior yelled as he hurled powdered bark into his eyes. He lost his grip on the axe and the Doctor sprang for it. The use of weapons was normally anathema to him, but there was little choice.

He heaved at the shaft and the trunk began to splinter. His three backseat supporters shouted useless nothings and distracted him. He tried to block them. Then Anjor was upon him again, but ill-prepared and shaken loose with ease. With all the force he could muster, the Doctor threw him back, leaving his muscles screaming; but if he could just get that axe...

Anjor was already back up, snarling incoherently. At least he seemed

to be in pain: he teetered, put a hand to his forehead and grabbed at a tree for support. Then he screamed as bright blue energy coruscated about him, singeing hair and eyebrows, blackening his skin and shooting him into the mire six feet away.

The axe came free at last. The Doctor was giddy with exhaustion. 'They electrified some trees,' he announced to no one, faintly. 'There were worse ways of discovering that, I suppose.'

Anjor, incredibly, was stirring. The Doctor tried to send him back to sleep with a nerve pinch, but the warrior's shoulders felt like knotted steel. He didn't have time to think.

He lashed out, punching his opponent's face twice, three times. Anjor cried in rage and the Doctor, every muscle screaming, slipped the axe around his neck and pulled it tight against his larynx. 'You lose this time, Anjor,' he muttered, spitting the name like an insult.

Anjor grunted with what sounded unsettlingly like satisfaction. 'To fall in battle. At last!' The Doctor shuddered, gritted his teeth and pulled on the axe shaft with all the strength he could muster.

'I don't understand,' said Kaerson. 'There are faults in these programs which just couldn't have got here. In some cases, whole sections of data are missing. We've got to get those people out of there, the whole sphere is a death trap.'

'It's supposed to be!' said Calvin, scornfully.

Kaerson ignored that. 'And according to these readouts, you've still got twelve people in the studio hooked up to VRTV.'

'Of course,' said Calvin, 'three to each of the remaining contestants. They're fully immersed, they don't even know what's happened. Why disturb them?'

'I think it would be safer if they were evacuated.'

'But we'd have to remount the whole programme!'

Mrs Walker had been seething quietly and at that remark, she exploded. 'Your pathetic, low quality game show is not worth risking lives for. Besides, you cannot consider screening this fiasco!'

'Hey, calm down, we can get around the audience problem.

We'll just drop in shots from past series.'

'Oh, and I suppose you'll send the film of today's disaster to *TV Bloopers*?!' Mrs Walker stormed. 'You make me sick!'

She clenched her fists and turned to Kaerson. 'I'm a qualified first aider,' she said, making an effort to control her voice. 'If you should need me, I'll be in the studio helping to tend to the wounded. Although if they had listened to me in the first place, this would never have happened!'

She hurried out and Calvin grinned. 'Touchy old cow, isn't she?' he said.

'You don't know what you're talking about!' snapped Kaerson.

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' asked Zed Mantelli, nervously. He gestured towards the camera, which was doubling as an autocue for this broadcast. Hastily scripted words were projected into mid-air before it. 'I mean, if all that stuff's true, we'd be better off running for it!'

His director bellowed in his earpiece, telling him that this was the story of the decade, he was lucky it had happened during his first day and if he didn't want skinning alive, he would damn well get on with it. He tried not to look flustered as he faced his viewing public.

'Erm, hello there Zee-fans. I know you shouldn't be seeing my smiling face tomorrow, but something's happening here that I thought you'd want to know about. A few, erm, faults in our computer systems. There's already been the most horrendous accident, with several members of the *Death-Hunt* audience maimed or killed. I'll bring you more details later. I also hear a spaceship nearly collided with us, but we managed to bring it safely on board. That means there's a possibility of alien intelligence on this station. They couldn't bear to watch me from afar any longer, eh? A-ha-ha-ha. Ain't that exciting, dudes? Yes. Well. As your Home Base Correspondent here on Sunlink, I'll be staying up through the night to give you all the gen and goss, so keep tuned to 3 and I'll be back after the systemwide weather.'

He flashed a false smile to the camera, saw that it had ceased transmission and replaced the expression with a grimace. 'Can we leave now, please?' he asked, receiving an earful of abuse in return.

Something hit his shoulder and he yelled out for six different relatives before seeing that it was merely a short-circuited camera.

Grant was in the sort of place he had often dreamed about.

Unfortunately, he was in the sort of situation which more normally gave rise to nightmares.

The control room was huge and dark and perhaps the most exciting place he had seen: computers and screens and consoles everywhere and technicians bustling about, operating equipment that he desperately wanted to get his hands on.

Trying that, he thought, would not be too clever. He had been dragged here by his erstwhile employer, left to sit and watch and keep his mouth shut and, for all he knew, forgotten about.

The door was left unwatched, but Grant was too scared to attempt escape. He didn't even know which planet he was on, except that it was not one he recognized, which discounted New Earth and (especially) Agora.

Shepherd busied himself giving orders, only some of which Grant understood. He was shadowed by a ludicrous short, bespectacled man in an orange shirt and badly clashing checked blue pants. 'We'll have to pull everybody out, there's no choice. Bring the remaining contestants to the studio and get Hal to talk to them. Go on Morris, move it!'

'– won't like that,' someone muttered just in earshot. '– a fortune to produce this –'

' *Time of Your Life* was supposed to –'

Like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the situation began to assemble itself in Grant's mind. All this, to Shepherd, was a game. A programming project, pit the contestants against the robot monsters in... in what? An authentic historical setting, it seemed (although even Grant found ludicrous any such claims made by New Earth). Hence *Time of Your Life*: the time-travelling adventure game show, with Neo Tokyo doubling for its twenty-first century template in the pilot episode, and never mind who died in the crossfire.

He thought of Stuart, the memory of his fate seeming distant and unreal. He couldn't grieve, he only felt empty.

It was indeed Shepherd who had set the mushroom devices.

But the barrier, it appeared, was more than that. Grant strained to

catch each mention of it, but he was still left confused. A

'Marston Sphere' they called it, into which Neo Tokyo had been somehow transported. The cameras had already been in place, awaiting its arrival. The robots and the Time Agents had been teleported in there later. He wondered how the village could be in two places simultaneously. What would the citizens of New London and New Paris find when they went searching for their neighbours? The outside of some impenetrable dome, or a smoking hole where once a thriving settlement had stood? Grant couldn't help but feel a little glad that, somehow, the insidious plan had gone so obviously wrong. He felt guilty when he thought of what that might mean for his fellow villagers.

'We're not talking about some tiny problems now,' said Shepherd, leaning over a programmer's shoulder and taking the operation of his terminal out of his hands. 'There's a fully fledged virus in this thing and it's stealing all the information it can pull out.'

Morris was by his shoulder again. 'What is it, espionage? If this is Option-8 –'

'They're having problems of their own. Whatever this is, it's got round every system on the station. Did you get the contestants out?'

'Yes sir.'

'And the monsters?'

'Just doing it.'

'When you have, we're sending Neo Tokyo back where it came from.'

Grant's stomach leapt. He got uncertainly to his feet. He wanted to protest, to demand that he be let back to his village before they sent it who knew how far away. His voice came out as a timid squeak and no one heard. They wouldn't have listened anyway. If Shepherd had wanted him to go home and live happy ever after, then he wouldn't have taken such pains to bring him here. He had plans for him, and Grant hated to speculate on what they might be. Still, no one had yet noticed that he'd even stirred.

That open door looked ever more tempting.

The Doctor's heartbeats slowed, his breathing regularized and the red spots began to clear from his eyes. He staggered to his feet, feeling

dizzy and sick, wiped a grimy sleeve across his forehead and hurled the axe to the ground. His enemy was still breathing – he'd applied just enough pressure to knock him out for a time, although he hoped he hadn't caused permanent damage.

He stumbled away, lending half a mind to the voices in his head. At their bidding, he stepped over a tripwire, which would have brought poisoned arrows bursting out of the brush at him. A black tide of bile rose in his throat. It always came down to violence, didn't it? The poison vines and acid baths of Varos; the way he had acted with Peri on Thoros Beta; his treatment of the space mercenary Lytton on Telos. He remembered the incident with the Vervoids, and wondered if that had actually happened yet. The Valeyard's face swam through his mind. His future incarnation, bitter and twisted, ready to do anything for the sake of prolonging his own life.

His past selves had not been like this. Was he really travelling down that path?

No! He had spared Anjor, he wouldn't kill. But only one person would be allowed out of the sphere. What was he hoping? That they would clash again? That something else would kill the barbarian, keeping blood well off his hands?

Would that make it all better? Would the means then justify the ends? By the very act of leaving Anjor unconscious in such an environment, had the Doctor not as good as killed him anyway?

He stopped by a rock pool, the sight of it reminding him how dry his throat was. He dropped a coin in before drinking and watched with dismay as acid corroded it.

He sensed that three contestants were dead now, only two left to fight. He tried not to consider that. He mulled over what he'd learnt in Shepherd's office, before the producer's untimely arrival had brought him to this moment. He knew more than he wanted to know about *Time of Your Life* and he could see the dangers associated with it. He still wasn't sure about the Time Lords' motives in sending him here, but he was beginning to see, at least, why he was needed.

A rustle alerted him too late. A stink of rancid meat wafted across his nostrils and there was something on his arm, a hissing, spitting ball of fur. He cried and flung it off, but it took a lump of flesh with it. Blood gushed from the wound and his sleeve hung loose and ragged. He kicked the creature away and fell back, seeing it properly for the first

time. It was lupine, but certainly no Earth wolf. Nor, for that matter, was it entirely alive. He stared into its eyes: red light bulbs, burning ferociously. Its teeth were double rows of serrated metal, stained black with the Doctor's blood. This was a biological organism, upgraded with cybernetics and programmed, it seemed, with unrelenting bloodlust. A manufactured killing machine.

It roared and slavered and sprung again. He lashed out and knocked it out of the air, but sharply honed plastic claws grazed his knuckles. He reached behind him and grabbed for the nearest tree. Fortunately, this one wasn't live. The creature tensed and sprang again, and the Doctor cracked a limb free and swung it. The branch had a metal skeleton, as he had suspected. Nothing in this sphere seemed truly real.

His second blow landed across the creature's head, drawing blood and sending it whimpering back to the bushes. It watched and circled, but didn't dare attack. He took a step towards it, swiped again and it scuttled into the undergrowth.

He turned and gladly put some distance between them.

He had travelled about a hundred metres when he heard screaming in his mind. A fist of pain exploded deep within his skull and something squeezed tight in his frontal lobes. He yelled until his throat was raw, cradled his head in agony and collapsed.

Something had invaded his very consciousness.

Kaerson jumped back, alarmed. He could hear screaming from the studio, and at the same time something materialized on his screen. A cartoon magpie, an animated sprite which seemed to be eating the information he had been endeavouring to correct.

'What is this, what's going on?' he asked, but Calvin was long gone and no reply came from the empty room.

For want of a more productive task, Kaerson rushed to investigate the screams. The *Death-Hunt* studio was almost empty. The rogue capsule lay a smouldering wreck, plastic chairs crushed and melted beneath it, cleaners hurrying to remove as much blood as possible before the news teams were allowed in (although, truth to tell, camera hackers already had all the footage they needed, ready to sell for the right price). In the corner of the set, nine people were still attached to VRTV

equipment. Six were down, medics clustered about their rigid bodies.

It was obvious that nothing could be done.

‘It seems something got to them through the headsets,’

Miriam Walker said, moving to his side. She looked as if she was going to be sick.

Kaerson covered his eyes and shivered. ‘Get the others disconnected and back to the shuttlebus,’ he ordered the nearest person, before staggering back to the control room.

The bird had vanished from the screen, but the terminal was inoperable. Kaerson booted another up and was relieved to find some data still accessible. What that data told him was less comforting.

‘I just saw that idiot floor manager,’ Mrs Walker called, appearing in the doorway. ‘He can’t find the Doctor’s forms.

He was prattling about his rivals, blaming Paradox or Red Hot Glutch or someone for setting him up.’ She caught Kaerson’s expression and faltered. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘We’re too late. That thing didn’t just get to the spectators.

It reached the minds of two contestants, too. One was the Doctor.’

Miriam Walker gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth. ‘I

– I didn’t like him much, but...’

‘I know.’

‘To be cut down like this. To be killed by the worst excesses of the television industry...’

‘Well that might be the least of our problems now.’

Kaerson was getting past the stage of shock and misery. Too much had happened, his emotions seemed distant and unresponsive. He spoke in a monotone as he reported the news. ‘If this sphere is doing what I think it is, then we’ll all be joining him soon.’

The laser torch powered down with a whine. A large, circular section of the wall fell inwards, making an uncontrollable crash as it landed. No radiation seeped from the aperture, no death-ray shot out to disintegrate Jak Martyn and his colleagues. Nor, as he could see from his readings, were the precautionary spacesuits they wore necessary.

The atmospheric pressure within the docking bay had equalized as normal, despite the interference of the visitor. Still tense none the less, he peeled the silver helmet from his head and pushed a shaking hand through sweat-plastered hair. He signalled to the others and they followed him cautiously through the newly made entrance hole. Two security officers and a technician: it was she who had performed the cutting operation. Martyn had wanted more people, but security all seemed to have disappeared. An important mission, his present companions had explained cursorily, they were all that could be spared.

They had burnt through deliberately behind Miriam Walker's pink shuttle. They were out of the creature's sight, although over Martyn's head a tendril stretched like a pylon wire, twitching and humming as something pulsed along it.

They rounded the corner of the ship and stood timorously in the shadows of its thruster housings, staring at the horrible black form of the techno-organism. It was still a good two hundred metres away, on the far side of the Programme Controller's personal enclosure, but it filled Martyn's stomach with revulsion. This was as close as he wanted to get.

'What now?' He wasn't sure how to answer that. He had really expected the decision to be taken from him. The creature's inactivity was puzzling and it left him feeling somehow helpless. He could think of only one plan, and the more it turned inside his mind, the more sensible and logical it began to seem.

'We shoot it. Concentrate your fire on the front end.' At this range, the effectiveness of their weapons would be halved.

Still, four blasts would be the equivalent of two full-strength ones and that should surely be sufficient?

Almost to his disappointment, there were no objections.

They took aim and Martyn closed his eyes and called to mind his sister's face. He wanted someone else to speak, but they waited on his command. He was only an engineer, why was he doing this? He tensed his firing arm and obliged them.

To his exhilaration, their sputtering yellow fire had an effect. They were too far away to see the details, but something broke from the thing's mass and clattered down the ship's side. It flinched and one tendril fell from the wall, cracked against a stanchion and broke

cleanly in two. Martyn whooped with delight. This was going to be easier than he'd dreamed. He would be a hero. 'Further back now. We'll disintegrate the bastard one piece at a time!'

Then something clunked on his right-hand side and the technician started, eyes wide, knowing even before Martyn did what had happened. The engines of Mrs Walker's ship were on ignition cycle, but how could that be with no one inside to control the program?

In the frantic second which followed, Martyn tried to warn the two officers, to push them to one side, to leap back through the opening, to take all four of them to safety. He had time to do none of that.

The engines fired, a bolt of plasma-generated flame licking out with infernal scorching heat. Four piles of black ashes crumbled silently to the floor.

When it knew it was alone again, the creature located the structural repair programs and plugged the intruders' access hole with fast-hardening sealant.

Anjor moved cautiously, avoiding by memory those traps he had encountered before, dodging by instinct those which had changed or been added since his last visit. He was tracking the Doctor, following a clear trail of crushed undergrowth. There were only two of them left now. Soon, there would be only one.

He pushed his way through thorny bushes and came up short when he eventually found his enemy. He was lying face-down in the mud, unconscious. Dead, perhaps? No, his mindlink would have told him had that been so. His wound was real enough though, a bloody mess on the upper left arm such as could have been inflicted by any one of a dozen creatures in this nightmare world.

He padded towards the fallen combatant, wary of a possible deception, watchful lest whatever did this should reappear. He turned the body cautiously, ready to jump should something fly from beneath it, perhaps one of the lethal metal insectoids he had once encountered in the sphere. No menace presented itself, and as he looked down at his fallen adversary, he felt the heady rush of triumph, tinged unfortunately with regret that, once more, it had all been too easy. He had hoped for more sport, especially from this particular foe. His death would leave Anjor, for the fourth time running, *Death-Hunt* champion. He'd be teleported out of the sphere to glory, acclaim, more riches and the resumption of endless monotony.

He was sorry that it had to be like this. But the game was over.

Then, as he raised his axe above his head and steadied himself to administer the killing stroke, he noticed something which made him stay his hand.

The Doctor slowly focused on Anjor's rough features, framed by mud-spattered hair. 'I thought I was dead,' he mumbled indistinctly.

'Decided to let you alone,' the warrior grunted.

'I meant from the VR feedback. I was attacked by a virus which mistook my mind for a computer. It killed the three audience members who were wired up to me, I'm afraid, but I had enough warning to stop it from doing the same to me.'

Anjor looked at him with new respect. 'How?'

'I reordered my neural pathways into an analog of a virus-busting program,' the Doctor told him airily. 'I expelled it from my system before it did me too much harm. Clever, eh?'

He grinned at Anjor, who half-smiled back. 'I knew I'd be safe from you. One good turn deserves another, right? I spare your life, you spare mine.'

'Woulda killed you anyway,' said Anjor, inspecting the bloodied end of his axe. The Doctor didn't like to think where those stains had come from. Or who. 'But look!' He gestured upwards and the Time Lord followed his gaze. It was a moment before he saw what his opponent was getting at.

'No cameras.'

'That's right. And the supporters have gone from my mind.

Something's wrong.'

'I'll say.' The Doctor pulled the VRTV connection from his ear. 'I'd get rid of this if I were you, before something tries to eat your brain from the inside.'

Anjor pointed to a crumpled piece of plastic in the mud.

'Already have.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Very good.' He put a hand out and the warrior

took it. ‘I’m the Doctor, and I’ve been a fool. Since I reached the station, I’ve allowed others to manipulate me. I’ve run around chasing my tail and trying to deal with the wrong problem. Perhaps if I had been a little more enthusiastic about this mission…’

‘You know what’s happening?’

‘The attack on me provided a few clues, yes. Come on, I’ll tell you as we go.’ He set off, but stopped when he saw that his companion wasn’t following.

‘Where to?’ asked Anjor, suspiciously.

‘To the sphere’s edge. Whatever we decide to do, we’ll have to get out of here first. I suggest, now we’re no longer constrained by the rules of *Death-Hunt 3000*, that we work together to accomplish that.’

The warrior nodded and the Doctor set off again. Anjor took his shoulder, turned him around and pushed him in the opposite direction. The Doctor smiled, abashed, and they walked on together.

Neither saw the set of electric red eyes which watched unblinkingly from the undergrowth. There were two of the man-apes now and the creature didn’t wish to place itself in jeopardy. For now, then, it would wait. But it had marked its prey, and soon its blood hunger must be sated. It would never give up.

Nine

nson Hammond sat in Giselle’s seat and monitored the situ

A ation on Giselle’s screens. Only seven were functional, but she had programmed a general search pattern and was silently calculating the path of least resistance to freedom. Her posture was casual, but she remained alert.

When she sensed her captive edging across to the comlink, she dissuaded her with a wave of her blaster rifle.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘The coast’s clear.’ Giselle sneered.

‘Oh, what’s up, Jiz? No injured innocence act?’ She put on a half decent impression of Giselle’s own ‘demure secretary’

voice. ‘“Please Miss Hammond, you don’t want me, you want the

Programme Controller and he's in a meeting with green men from Mars." Pity you weren't fooling as many people as you thought.'

'I wouldn't waste my breath on you.'

'Good idea, you mightn't have much left. Now get out that door. We're going on a trip.'

Giselle's defiance seemed to drain from her. She sagged and spread her arms imploringly. 'Look, seriously... Anson...

you know we're in an emergency. I'm needed here, it's important.' She nodded towards her monitors. On one, the Doctor and his barbarian friend were picking their way through a minefield in the *Death-Hunt 3000* sphere. On another, reporters mouthed silent platitudes as they swarmed eagerly over the carnage in the studio.

Hammond shook her head. 'Nice try. But I let you contact Kaerson, didn't I? He's the best engineer this station's had, and Marston isn't bad either. They'll handle it.'

'Terry Marston's dead!'

She didn't flinch. 'If you were needed so vitally to replace him, I wouldn't have caught you running away with your bags packed.'

'I was going to engineering.'

'Come off it, lady. You've manipulated me enough, I'm not playing along with any more tricks. Fact is, you didn't give a toss about the problems of the Network until you thought you might get stuck here. Well don't worry about that, you're coming to Nostralia – and I'll make sure you're very well looked after.' She smiled tightly and jerked her gun up.

Giselle, still fuming, got the message and turned to leave.

She faltered in the corridor. 'Wait, my briefcase. I left it –'

'Forget it. We're not doing this for your benefit. Now move!'

Giselle moved, obviously perturbed by her loss. 'You won't get to the shuttlebus you know,' she promised surlily. 'I have guards covering every exit.'

'I know. That's where you come in.'

Giselle gave a derisory snort. ‘I’m only a personal assistant.

No decent security officer would let a convicted murderer escape because she might harm me. They’ll stop you no matter what.’

‘I wouldn’t bet on it.’ Hammond spoke through her teeth, prodding the wretched woman forward impatiently. ‘There is one officer stupid and corrupt enough to let me past him.

That’s who we’re heading for.’

Anjor stopped and raised a warning hand. ‘Ssh, listen.’ The Doctor halted, his feet fighting for traction. He didn’t hear anything. ‘Something stalking us.’ With barely a sound, just a rustle and a flap of wings, a bird shot from the trees. It had black eyes and a white plumage, grey tips on its wings... it was identical to the one the Doctor had downed before. He ducked, but Anjor jumped instead and plucked the creature out of mid-air. It screeched in torment as he gripped its stumpy back legs, yanked them apart and ripped it down its length.

‘Did you have to do that?’ The Doctor turned away, revolted.

His companion was probing the bird’s innards, pulling wet pink meat out in thin strands. ‘Good food, this. Want a taste?’

‘I’ll give it a miss, thanks. What is it?’

‘A jooloo bird from Leena. Didn’t take to colonization, used to go for peoples’ eyes. 0-8 did a deal with the exterminators, those that survived got brought here.’ He dropped the gutted carcass and wiped his greasy hands on his costume. ‘Usedta be handy. The first *Death-Hunt* s lasted two or three days. Until I came along and it went down to hours.’

He grinned. ‘This one, just minutes.’

‘Yes, but this time something else has been killing the competition.’ The Doctor strained to peer through the mist. It seemed to grow thicker the further outwards they travelled.

‘How far now?’

‘Not long, Doc.’ He winced at the use of the diminutive, but decided it best not to object. ‘Few minutes. A lot faster’n the way you wanted to go. Just watch out for them jooloos, they nest round the edge.’

‘Yes, I had to deal with one on my way in.’ The Doctor inspected his fingernails with deliberate nonchalance. Anjor stared for a moment, then laughed.

‘You’re a better warrior than you look, my friend. Picked yourself a scratch up though, yeah?’

The Doctor looked to his shoulder. He had stripped off the torn overalls and was in shirt-sleeves and waistcoat, an improvised denim bandage staunching the blood flow from his wound. ‘A cybernetically augmented wolf,’ he explained.

Anjor was suddenly alert. He grabbed the stones from his belt pouch and circled hurriedly, tense for any signs of movement. The Doctor saw nothing, but Anjor produced a large smooth pebble and hurled it at the undergrowth. A shadow yelped, detached itself from a clump of bushes and bolted.

‘That was it! An example of the species, anyway.’

‘Same critter, for definite. A H’arthi: cyborg thing, half its brain replaced by computer, keeps its instincts intact but makes it ten times deadlier. If it’s bitten you, it’s got your blood scent.’

‘Good job you scared it off then.’

‘It won’t go far. They get a trail, they follow it. They don’t eat or rest or think about anything other’n finishing the job they started. They don’t give up.’

The Doctor tried to retain a casual air. ‘I suppose they’ve never lost a victim either?’ He had already guessed the answer.

‘You’re dead!’ said Anjor, in all sincerity.

‘Hello. Erm, this is Zed Mantelli, bringing you more zapping up-to-date news on the sitch here on... on the Network. Well, we now know there’s an alien on board, we’ve been able to confirm that. It seems to have entered our computer systems and is extracting all the data it can find. Some sort of intergalactic spy eh, Zee-fans? A-ha-ha... ha... yes, well, we also know that sixteen people died in the disaster at the Option-8 studios. Twelve more are critically injured. I’m at the medical centre now, where... where... look, it’s getting a bit dangerous here, dudes. I’ll return you to your regular, erm, your documentary or whatever. I don’t think I’ll be... oh. No, apparently we will be continuing our broadcasts, I’ve just been told that. I... I might be back

in a few minutes then. *Will* be back. Okay. Goodbye.'

Mae rushed towards the shuttleport with what she hoped looked like an unhurried gait. An anti-grav platform tagged obediently along behind her, stacked high with bulging cases, her expensive synthe-fur coat draped deliberately and conspicuously over the pile. As she turned into the approach corridor, she was startled to see people jogging past her, similarly laden. It wasn't quite a mass exodus, but it was enough to fill the bus before she arrived if she wasn't fast.

'What are you doing here?'

She recoiled as Dan Brookes appeared from the shadows. 'I was looking for you,' she lied. 'We have to leave.'

'You what?'

'This whole place, it's being evacuated. On the sly, though

– there aren't enough facilities for everyone. I found out from an old producer chum of mine. Come on love, or you're cooked.'

'Not yet,' said Brookes. 'I've got a job to do!'

'But it's an emergency –'

'Well no one told me, and I'm Security Chief. At least, I will be.' Mae was going to say more, but a mischievous grin spread across Brookes's face and he walked past her, eyes sparkling eagerly. She turned and spotted the cause of his sudden zeal. Hammond had rounded the corner. The pair were still some thirty metres apart, but their eyes locked in mutual hatred. Brookes's gun was aimed at Hammond's head, but her rifle was pressed to a different target.

'I'm sure the Programme Controller wouldn't like you to cause his assistant's death,' she said, tightening her arm around Giselle's neck so that the older woman squeaked.

Hammond glanced up at a camera. 'I've programmed that to relay our confrontation straight to him on Meson Primus.'

'But he's on the station.'

'Ah yes, I forget I'm dealing with Neanderthal man here.

Just take my word for it: you get trigger happy, your promotion's canned for good. You'd best let me on that bus.'

Brookes scowled. ‘Keep a seat warm for me lover,’ he muttered. Then, to Hammond, he announced: ‘You can threaten all you like, it won’t do no good.’

Mae sighed, dismissed his request and ordered her luggage forward. A few more people passed, slowed only momentarily as they gave a wide berth to the ugly scene in the corridor.

Quite honestly, Mae didn’t care whether Dan Brookes escaped or not. So long as she did, that was all that mattered. She hoped that Raymond might survive too, but there was no question of wasting time in search of him. She quickened her pace and left both men to their own devices.

The Doctor came up short as Anjor grabbed his arm and yanked. He slid, lost balance, landed on his backside and protested loudly. In answer, Anjor pushed between two closely growing trees and placed his foot smartly through the glass pane on a spherical object similar to the flying cameras.

‘Illusion machine!’ A red light rippled across ground which had seemed mossy and relatively solid. There was a mudpool there now, its turbulent surface boiling angrily.

‘A hologram projector,’ the Doctor breathed. ‘No doubt that pool’s acidic too.’ He loosened his collar in response to an uncomfortable increase in body temperature.

‘Lucky I caught a glint of light in time.’ Anjor produced another stone and skirted his way around the obstruction.

‘More bad news.’

‘Do I want to hear it?’ The warrior hurled his projectile.

For the fifth time, the H’arthi squealed and retreated.

‘Persistent, isn’t it? Maybe you should save the rocks for if it comes at us.’

‘ *When* it comes,’ said Anjor, ‘there won’t be time. It’s got computer fibres knitted into its nervous system or somesuch.

It’s faster’n me, and that’s saying something.’ The Doctor suppressed a shiver. His companion had halted and was staring about intently. ‘It’s back,’ he announced. ‘Behind us, eight o’clock. Gettin’ braver.’ He

fingered his axe. Its shaft had been passed through his belt and its head rested against his ribs, spreading a wet stain across his leotard.

'How far to the edge?'

'On top of it now.' They took a few more paces, then Anjor stopped and placed both hands against the air, like a mime groping for the parameters of an imaginary window.

The Doctor joined him. There was indeed a physical wall there, although even with that knowledge, his sight deceived him totally. 'Well camouflaged,' he said. 'I wouldn't like to come running down here in a hurry.'

The warrior shrugged. 'I wouldn't know. I never run.'

Something rustled behind them, and even the Doctor could sense the impending peril this time. Anjor cursed, turned and hurled yet another stone at the approaching creature. The H'arthi ran, but not so far now. The Doctor saw it slink behind a withered tree and wait, its red eyes ever on him. 'Warned you,' Anjor said. 'It's scoping us out, plucking up courage.

Next time, maybe it won't stop.'

The Doctor dropped onto his haunches. 'Then we'd better leave here soon.' He dug into the mud, then shifted position and tried again. 'Eureka! Here, put that axe to work productively. See if you can split this little thing open.'

Anjor frowned at the small, metallic, mushroom-shaped device that the Doctor had unearthed. He pulled the weapon from his belt and described a ferocious whistling arc with it, bringing the sharp edge down across the dead centre of the unfamiliar object. The impact jarred his body and almost shook his teeth loose.

The Doctor smiled. 'That's fine,' he said. 'I didn't think you'd damage it, it's made of a torrodium alloy, but you cracked its protective coating. I can reach the controls.'

'It's a machine?'

'That's right. This clever contraption, along with a few of its friends, is responsible for the barrier.' He indicated the four buttons on the device's helmet. 'Unfortunately, it can only be manually operated through a simplistic quaternary code, so it will take some time and a

lot of concentration to get us out of this predicament.'

Anjor stared blankly. 'It's hard?'

'It's hard!' The Doctor looked at him with a broad grin.

'Give me two minutes, then we're out of here.'

A plaintive whimper burst from the ever vigilant H'arthi's throat, and Anjor hefted his axe warily. 'I wish you hadn't said that.'

'It couldn't understand?'

'It knows we're going to leave. Doesn't matter how scared it is now, there's no way it'll let you –' Anjor was forced to leave his explanation unfinished.

The H'arthi broke cover and leapt for the Doctor's throat.

A computer screen spilt green light onto Dom Shepherd's taut face. He had elbowed a programmer off this terminal, deciding the best way to get a job done was to do it himself. He was now beginning to understand that he wasn't capable.

'Sir,' Morris shrilled in his ear. 'The cleaner boy from New Earth, sir, he's gone.'

He scowled and tried to concentrate. He had noticed Grant's absence long ago, but where could he run? 'Hunt him down and shoot him then, don't bother me with the details.'

Morris blanched and gibbered, and it was seconds before he could speak coherently. 'Is something wrong?'

'If, by that, you mean "Are we all going to die?" Morris, then the answer is "Yes we are." The dimensional resonance of Neo Tokyo is fluctuating and it's only a matter of time before it matches our own. You do know what that means, don't you?' The assistant director had been nodding vaguely through Shepherd's speech. He suddenly realized that and shook his head instead. 'In layman's terms,' said Shepherd patiently, 'it means the world inside the Marston Sphere will try to occupy the same space as the one outside.'

'That's bad?'

'That's an understatement.'

‘I-I’ll look for the boy then,’ said Morris. He scampered away, leaving Shepherd to his work, and ran headlong for the nearest escape shuttle.

Grant fled down a wide, grey, colonnaded passage, knowing only that he had to get away from Paradox. He was frightened, lost and praying desperately to run into something that might restore some order to his life.

Instead, he found two robots. They strode from behind a pillar, and at first their faces were hidden in shadow. His chest felt like a spinning top had been let loose in it. His neck bristled and someone played xylophone with an ice stick on his spine. As the apparitions closed, he saw their heads clearly: blank ovoids, smooth and expressionless. They had no arms, but he was positive they could harm him anyway.

Grant turned and ran, doubling speed as a great metal whip cracked out and missed him, chipping masonry from a column by his ear. Robots! Why was it always robots? Could Shepherd have sent them? Programmed them to bring him back? It didn’t escape him that he was being herded back the way he’d come. Then the floor shifted and he tumbled, sprawling face first into... fresh mud? Rising unsteadily, he felt the cold wind of the outdoors, smelt smoke from some distant fire. The sky was red, the trees were black, grasping for him with skeletal limbs. A creature howled, too close for comfort. Reality flipped, his stomach turned a loop and suddenly, he was elsewhere again.

The carriage reminded him of the railway back home, but dirtier, unmaintained. The grease-streaked window looked only onto a dark blur, a passing tunnel. He lurched towards a seat, collapsing into its torn red vinyl embrace. Was he the only one to have felt it? No. He was sure that, in the moment of his arrival, the train itself had pitched to one side. The frightened faces of his co-travellers seemed to bear that out.

An old couple, obviously frightened. They backed away and fled to the comfort of the next carnage up.

A third man lay on his back across four seats, an empty bottle rattling on the floor beneath his outstretched hand. He wore a leather jacket and jeans. Black hair was plastered onto his skull, sodden by sweat and misplaced alcohol. ‘I dunno what’s wrong with them,’ said Raymond Day, leering one-sidedly. ‘You’d think they’d never seen space folding over and someone popping out before.’ Grant hadn’t either, and he tentatively said so.

‘Suppose you wouldn’t have,’ said Raymond. ‘That’s what I get for living with a Timerider!’ He rolled onto his side, coughed heavily and was sick on the floor.

‘Sorry Danny boy,’ said Hammond. ‘Jiz and I have a ship to catch, and it’s leaving any minute. We’re going to board and you are not going to stop us.’

‘Don’t bet on that,’ Brookes warned. He tightened his grip on the gun, but he was bluffing surely? Hammond pushed her prisoner forward and shuffled carefully towards him.

‘Remember, if you do shoot me, I’ll pull my trigger as a reflex action. It’s both or neither of us. Are you sure you can risk that?’ Her foe scowled and said nothing. He turned slowly, his sights keeping track of her, though he didn’t dare fire. Hammond smiled as she drew level with him. ‘I knew you’d see sense.’ She winked and reached to take his weapon.

Her hand passed through it. ‘Oh, hell!’

He was on her, appearing from an intersecting corridor, snatching her rifle and turning it on her even as Giselle staggered thankfully away. She was on the defensive now. She backed up, through the flickering light image which now vanished. ‘A hologram! That was never your idea, unless you’ve somehow grown a brain in the past hour!’

‘I got it from your desk.’

Hammond groaned. ‘Of course. The fake “escape plans” I left for you to find. I didn’t anticipate your having the intelligence to copy them.’ Giselle, still clutching her bruised throat, had run for it. She must be desperate, to be prepared to miss this humiliation of her enemy. She had not headed towards the shuttlebus, though. Probably had her own arrangements. Hammond smiled and tried to relax her body.

‘You don’t think I loaded that gun, do you? I was waiting for something like this to happen.’ She turned and began to walk casually towards freedom. One... two... three...

Brookes howled, dropped the weapon and leapt for her. She ducked, twisted and slammed him into the wall. ‘Forget what I said about the new brain, you’re still a moron.’ She went for the rifle, but to her chagrin, he was faster. He grabbed her hair and tugged her painfully back. She responded with an elbow in his guts and the pair rolled to the floor, locked in savage battle.

Anjor was ready for the H'arthi's attack, but even so he almost wasn't quick enough to block it. He swung his axe and the handle connected with the creature's side. It wailed and retreated. On its second lunge he missed it and it landed squarely on the Doctor's shoulders. Its victim yelled and tried to shake it off. Anjor rammed the axe head into its face. It squealed but clung, determined to feed. He grabbed its throat and squeezed, so it was too busy breathing to think about biting. It twisted and squirmed and lashed out with its claws.

He pulled in his chest but it ripped his clothing and dealt him a graze. To his relief, it didn't bloody him. He threw it off before its second try. The H'arthi landed on its back with a satisfying crack.

It was on its feet in a second, snarling and drooling. A sliver of metal had been exposed in its front left leg and a short wire waved at him and sparked intermittently. Its right eye had cut out, but the remaining bulb burned with determined intensity. It stared at him and circled, and he edged around in a corresponding curve, staying opposite, keeping his eyes on it. Its damage was inconsequential. The H'arthi was practically indestructible. Its previous retreats had been but a matter of instinct, and now computer-simulated bloodlust was overriding such primitive concerns.

The H'arthi sprang again... at the Doctor. But Anjor was ready for that, interposing himself and knocking it to the ground. It had tried to trick him, but he knew how it worked.

No matter how much he harmed it, it would always go for his companion. Until it tasted his blood, then it would happily kill them both. The Doctor worked feverishly and Anjor admired his concentration in the shadow of death. 'Just thirty seconds now,' he grunted.

The H'arthi attacked again, clamping metal teeth around his wrist. He cried in pain and dropped the axe. He flung the creature off, too easily this time. It had let go willingly. It took the weapon handle in its mouth and ran with it, towards the bushes where it dropped it too far for him to reach. It was clever! He rubbed his wrist ruefully – this was the first time in two games he'd been wounded. His heart sank when his hand came away damp. It had drawn blood.

The H'arthi's next attack was aimed at him, and it meant business. It wouldn't care now who it got first, so long as both its victims died. He was lucky, he got to its throat before it got to his. He kept it held at arm's length, ignoring the painful scratches it delivered to his lower

arms and the overpowering smell of raw, ravaged flesh.

‘Five seconds.’

He held on an instant longer, then threw it as hard and far as he could. It fell on its feet and its legs propelled it back at him with all the strength remaining in their enhanced sinews.

It was as though it could sense its foes’ imminent departure. It launched itself once more, and Anjor shrank against the Doctor, feeling frightened for the first time he could remember. They had run out of time.

The H’arthi slammed into the invisible barrier and screamed its rage and desperation to the scarlet heavens. It was alone now, deprived of its rightful kills, and it pined and keened for a full five minutes at the first loss of its unnaturally prolonged life. In the computerized portion of its brain, a program cycled through its paramount imperative. It had to find them, to take them, to finish its feast.

The H’arthi fell silent then. The ground was shaking, the air seemed to ripple and an unfamiliar ozone scent wafted across its sensitized nostril hairs. Its computer mind clicked into action.

The engineers had worked wonders on the H’arthi’s technologically augmented intellect. It was more resourceful than even they knew. It was sensing a fifth-dimensional disturbance that might soon give it all it wanted. So, for now, it watched and waited.

It never gave up.

Kaerson’s habitually grey face lit up when the Doctor and Anjor raced into the technical centre. ‘I thought you were –’

‘Yes, but “Reports of my death” and all that. What’s happening?’

Mrs Walker butted in. ‘How did you get here?’

The Doctor was already by Kaerson’s side, tapping at his computer keyboard as he answered. ‘We manipulated the sphere’s outer plasmic shell generator until the dimensional fields touched, allowing us to cross the interface. Didn’t we, Anjor?’

‘Uhh...’

‘Put another way, we folded space over and popped out.’

The warrior's face cleared. 'That was it!'

Kaerson was startled. 'But to alter the dimensional resonance like that and yet prevent the fields from merging –'

'It's quite impossible, I assure you. Tell me, have you experienced any other spatial anomalies recently?'

'A few ripples. I'm afraid the Marston Sphere is –'

'Beginning to merge with real space, I thought so. I could tell as I manipulated the resonances that they were fluctuating already. The subroutine which keeps the sphere's interior separate from the real world is monstrously chaotic and badly malfunctioning. Someone wants shooting for this programming job, but they'll probably just die screaming instead with their internal organs squeezed into the same space as a metal-framed tree.'

Miriam Walker and Anjor exchanged a look of shared ignorance and concern. Mrs Walker terminated the contact when she remembered what Anjor's profession was. The Doctor had patched his terminal through to the camera circuits and a picture was forming on the slightly grainy screen. The docking bay. 'There's your culprit, Mr Kaerson.'

'I thought it was some virus. *Kirlix*, it calls itself.' Kaerson inspected the picture, the black teeming mass straddling the battered security vessel. The Doctor wasn't answering. He stared at the screen as if some horrible thought had hit him.

'Doctor?'

'Mmm? Oh, yes. "Some virus" indeed. But a physical one.'

Kaerson frowned and tried to interject, but the Doctor seemed to have shaken off his fleeting vexation and was back to his old, unflappable self. 'A techno-organic entity, extending its own being into your computers. A datavore.'

'Stealing information!'

'Or ingesting, to be more accurate. Replacing it with its own substance. Growing fatter as it absorbs more data, puffing up like a great bloodsucking leech.'

'It could get all round the station,' Kaerson realized. 'The amount of

spying, the number of back doors between systems... it's inconceivable!'

'More than that. Through your VRTV equipment, it has inadvertently entered and eaten the minds of at least three people already. I don't imagine it enjoyed them, but I think they relished the experience less.'

Miriam Walker gasped at this revelation. The Doctor turned back to the computer, deleting the image with three keystrokes. He worked for a minute longer, pausing only to congratulate Kaerson on his efforts thus far. 'Remarkably efficient for a paper-pusher.' When he sat back, it was with a grunt of satisfaction. 'Done it!'

'What?'

'I've severed all links between the station and the sphere's interior. It's no threat now.'

'You mean, no *Death-Hunt*?' said Anjor.

Mrs Walker folded her arms and smiled. 'Well that is plainly the most decent thing that has happened all day.'

'But it might yet be the last,' said the Doctor. 'There are two spheres on the Network, remember.' He raced from the room without pause and, after a second, Anjor followed.

Mrs Walker moved to Kaerson's side as he retook his position and checked through the Doctor's alterations.

'Amazing! Incredible!' His brow furrowed. 'No, that can't be true.'

'What is it?'

'It seems that, as the two dimensions were at their closest, something... *jumped* across the remaining gap. But surely that would be impossible?'

The shuttlebus was packed to capacity, but desperate evacuees were still trying to cram themselves through the door. Mae was amongst those who were shouting and screaming and pushing the intruders away. Now that they were safely inside, their thoughts had turned to the risks of overloading.

'We'll get another bus sent up,' one man was promising, trying to justify the pole with which he drove two children back through the

hatch. Mae recognized him: a Wolf producer she had once slept with, alas with no good career consequences.

'Get out, you'll kill us!' someone else shrieked. Outside, a woman fell from the gangway, wailing for her lost place in the growing queue.

As those inside gained ground, the whining electronic door began to close, trapping arms and legs and bags shoved hopelessly into its path. Mae grabbed one hand and it clenched around her own. Its owner's face bobbed into view, frightened and beseeching. It was Morris, the assistant director of *Jubilee Towers*. Mae remembered how Raymond had been treated and she bit his finger viciously. He yelped, withdrew and the door, at last, was able to shut. Its compression lock hissed as it engaged. The pilot started the engines and there was nothing left to prevent her escape.

Mae pushed her way into the passenger section, where her luggage was taking up a valuable chair. She approached the frightened boy who huddled next to it, using the full force of her considerable personality to make him move. She sat, with a feeling of intense relief. She was crowded and uncomfortable and the ship smelt of sweat and fear, but at least she would be all right. There were probably too many people on board, but Meson Primus was the nearest planet, and with some luck they might be forced to land there instead of on dreary Nostralia. The engines squealed, but ignited satisfactorily and the bus juddered as it felt its way out of the airlock. She closed her eyes and dreamt of new life.

'Excuse me,' said a voice behind her. 'Aren't you Mae Jordan, the actress?'

Mae beamed. 'That's right, dear. Who wants to know?'

'I'm Richard, this is Ged. We're big *Timeriders* fans.'

'Can we have your autograph?'

'Why don't you ever do conventions?'

'Do you think the series should come back?'

Grant disembarked with Raymond at Grundy Square. He didn't trust the stranger yet, but he had at least been civil, which made him the best friend Grant had made so far.

The station, like the train, was dingily lit and ill-kept. It was also

deserted. Discarded papers had been ground into the concrete floor and posters advertising unfamiliar TV

programmes hung, torn and limp, from dirty green tiles.

Raymond led him up a short flight of steps, to where four glass tubes stood. Silver one-man capsules perched within them, resolutely immobile. The actor frowned, leaned against the wall for support and punched the side of one, annoyed.

'The anti-gravs are out.'

Grant grasped the capsule's functions quickly, although he had only read about such things in Old Earth books before.

'Can't we use the stairs?'

'Not here, there are none. We'll have to get back on the train.'

Grant didn't relish that prospect. Casting around, he noticed a red box set into one wall. It was marked 'EMERGENCY ONLY'

but he opened it anyway, to reveal a small control panel. 'The alarm circuit must be down,' said Raymond, 'or that thing would've fried your brains out.'

'This isn't a power problem,' he reported, trying not to let that thought distract him. 'Something's wrong with the program itself.' Raymond moved in to look over his shoulder and Grant recoiled from the alcohol on his breath. 'It must be the virus. What's with that thing, anyway?'

'What thing?'

'The virus, you know. Dom... erm, someone told me it was in all the systems, causing problems everywhere.'

Raymond shook his head, but beneath the drunken exterior he seemed to be concerned. 'Perhaps we should get back to the train, get up to the surface, find out what's happening?'

Reluctantly, Grant pulled back from the panel. 'I thought I might be able to fix this, but I don't recognize the programming language. It could take me hours to decipher it.'

'So it's back to the platform. We'll be waiting a while though, at this time of night.'

‘Night? Early morning now, surely.’

Raymond checked his chronometer. ‘2240,’ he said indifferently. Grant nodded. He was in a different time zone, of course. He wondered how far he’d been brought.

Raymond caught his breath. ‘What is it?’ Grant asked, suppressing a natural panic reaction. Something growled behind him. Against his better instincts, he looked.

It was on the steps: a wolf-like creature, part mechanical.

Metal glinted from its leg and a red bulb shone from one narrowed eye. The H’arthi curled its top lip into a hungry snarl. ‘Keep still,’ Raymond whispered, although such advice was quite unnecessary to Grant. ‘If you value your life, keep very still.’

‘– the hell can you expect me to… oh. Sorry. Erm, hi there…

Zee-fans. Have I got news for you! We have a genuine, grade-A, red alert, run-for-the-lifeboats type emergency here on the Network. Except that there are no lifeboats left to run for.

With this alien whatsit making its way round the computers, everything’s falling apart. It’s killed four people already who tried to… tried to break into… oh this is ridiculous, I’m trapped here, they’ve given the escape pods to all the big brass and if anyone can send a shuttle to pick me up I’ll pay them anything, I’ll… I’ll mention them on my next show, I’ll do whatever they want, I… might even get out of broadcasting.

Honestly! The engines are failing and the station’s going to crash and I I… I don’t want to die, please save me, I –’

‘Where are we going?’ Anjor shouted.

‘Gaslight Promenade,’ the Doctor called back. ‘Paradox’s offices. Have you been there?’

‘No.’

‘Then you’re lucky. They’re producing a particularly nasty time-travel game show called *Time of Your Life*. They’re using a Marston Sphere, and as they pirated the blueprint from the *Death-Hunt* people, I doubt it will be any more stable than theirs was.’

‘You mean the danger’s not over?’

‘I mean it’s only begun.’ They reached an intersection and the Doctor hared off to the right. Even as Anjor gained his bearings and followed, his companion turned and headed down the opposite fork instead. ‘The spheres,’ he explained as they ran, ‘are peripheral to the problem, they’re only symptoms of the datavore’s continuing penetration of the computer network. What we need to worry about is what it intends to do when its occupation is complete.’

Anjor nodded, although he understood little. The Doctor halted, bewildered by a four-way junction. ‘I was wrong about the Time Lords,’ he said, as if the thought had just occurred to him. ‘I know now why they sent me here. I only hope it’s not too late for me to accomplish my mission for them.’

‘What mission?’

‘To save a great many people from extinction,’ the Doctor said. ‘Ourselves included.’

Shepherd stopped work and stared at the TV screen. He had tuned in to Sunlink, expecting updates on the deteriorating situation. He had not expected the newscaster to faint before the cameras.

Most of his technicians had fled upon the official pronouncement of doom. A couple stayed, sitting shell-shocked, but Shepherd didn’t care about them. He only had one option left. At least, he hoped there were so many.

Mantelli had claimed that there were ‘no lifeboats left’. He clung to the vain hope that the presenter had been misinformed, or that he’d exaggerated the peril for effect. He scanned reports on all forms of egress from the station, and slowly grasped the fact that that wasn’t the case.

Somehow, there had been a silent evacuation, one to which he hadn’t been invited. He was trapped here, left to his fate and if he couldn’t stop the virus, then he would die. He stared at his reflection in the screen and watched as an expression of fury spread across his features. He knew exactly who to blame for this.

‘Giselle, you bitch!’ he hissed venomously.

Giselle started as a strip light exploded. She snivelled and brushed hot glass from hazel hair which was no longer so tidily placed as she had

once insisted. She ducked into her office, wishing fervently that she hadn't had to come back for the briefcase. It was on her desk, packed with incriminating documents, information which many influential people wouldn't like to see made public.

Damn Hammond! She had lost track of everything now.

She needed a monitor on line, had to see which pods were available. She managed to get power to four, but the magpie appeared instantly, scything across the screens, drawing information into its ravenous maw. To her surprise, her terminal was operational. She worked it frenziedly, noting that massive data reservoirs had already been sucked dry. At first, she disbelieved what it was telling her.

Someone had obviously talked, and the evacuation she had thought secret was revealed. Executives she hadn't authorized to live had fled the station of their own volition, taking emergency shuttles with them. She had been betrayed, and the thought was a cold sword thrust into her abdomen. The Nostralian bus had left and the docking bay was inaccessible.

She was trapped with the losers.

The computer brought one more thing to her attention. She had forgotten Martyn's warnings. It was 2250 and the station had drifted into the first sun's gravitic pull. It didn't have the engine capacity to escape. She had about an hour before she died, whatever happened. She operated her comlink, working on audio only now, and put a call through to the Option-8

technical centre. The Deputy Programme Controller answered.

'Kaerson, it's me. There's no way off the station, I'm trapped. Get that thing out of the docking bay and get me away or I'll... *I'll rip off your balls and stuff them down your throat!* ' She broke the connection with a stab, then realized she had forgotten to engage the voice modulator.

Ten

rant's foot was crushed. An elbow was jammed into his G left nostril. His right leg had pins and needles up to the knee and the air was stale and smelt of beer. He was hot and uncomfortable and almost ready even to face the wolf-thing if it meant getting out of here and breathing again.

‘You’re on my foot,’ he complained through clenched teeth.

‘What with?’ asked Raymond, equally strained.

‘Your whole body.’

‘I can’t move that.’

Grant groaned and pushed with arm muscles which felt like overstretched elastic. The capsule door popped open and the pair tumbled out of the tube. Raymond fell onto his back and complained that the sudden rush of air was making him queasy. Grant strained to achieve a crouching position, blinking fluid back from his tear ducts as he watched for indications of danger. The concourse, happily, was deserted.

‘What was that thing?’

‘A H’arthi. Don’t ask how, but it must have gotten out of *Death-Hunt 3000*.’ Grant didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t matter. ‘Good thing it was injured, or it would have ripped us apart before we got halfway to the anti-grav capsules.’

Grant twitched nervously, remembering the terrifying sounds of scratching, the unearthly wails of disappointment from beyond their metal prison. There had been no sounds for minutes now, but still he scanned the shadows fastidiously. At any signs of lupine predators, he would shoot back to their only haven, cramped or not.

‘We can’t go to the platform now,’ said Raymond, his speech a good deal clearer now. The adrenalin rush of their escape had evidently helped purge his system. ‘It must be there, there’s nowhere else it could be.’

‘No problem,’ said Grant. ‘Look.’

It was a moment before Raymond was able to lever his body off the ground and follow his comrade’s gaze. It was worth the effort. A capsule bobbed in its tube, suspended on a cushion of compressed air.

‘I take it that means it’s working?’

‘You take it right,’ said Raymond, and before Grant could stop him he stumbled thankfully into the container. ‘I’ll send it back for you and meet you up top,’ he called. Then he slammed the door shut and the elevator began its rapid but smooth ascent. Grant was left alone in

darkness, wondering again how he had come so far from home.

‘I thought you knew where we were going,’ said Anjor, as the Doctor procrastinated at another junction.

‘So did I,’ he said, ‘but this place has more twists and turns than the classical labyrinth. The only time I’ve been to Paradox, I was forced to resort to the train.’

‘Then why not again?’

‘With the state of the computers at present, that would be at best an unreliable way to travel and at worst tantamount to suicide. No, we must remain on foot. I shall have to employ my unerring directional skills in solving our geographical conundrum.’

Anjor nodded with the glazed expression which meant he had lost track of his friend’s meaning two sentences ago. The Doctor pulled a blue coin from his pocket, flipped it, checked the result and headed left.

‘You said you could work out which way by yourself.’

‘I did. The coin was double-headed.’ As Anjor was still trying to work that one out, the Doctor halted. ‘A short-cut!’

he announced confidently, sliding a door open. He cried out as something bulky and metallic thrust past him. It staggered out into the corridor, collided with the opposite wall and fell with a hiss and a splutter of electronics.

Anjor laughed. ‘’Sjust a robot, from that rabbit programme.’ It was fashioned after a bipedal cow, and it possessed a handgun which the Doctor eyed suspiciously.

‘Fancy being scared of that. It can’t hurt you.’

The Doctor glared at him. ‘I know that,’ he said, rubbing his shoulder reflexively. ‘Come on, through here.’

Brookes’s hands were round Hammond’s throat and his face shot into soft focus as it leered above her. It irked her more than anything that he might have the satisfaction of killing her.

So she twisted her head and managed to spit on him and with his face turned, distracted, she put her remaining strength into a pelvic thrust

which rolled him away but didn't loosen his grip. Her right leg freed, she drew it up and managed to place the foot against his cheek. She pushed him back and was dragged along too, ears burning, breath deserting her. She slammed her knee into his groin and he let go at last. She grabbed his hair, banged his head into the floor and disentangled herself from his huge, sweating body. He was gasping, nursing his aching skull, so she kicked it again until he groaned and fell unconscious and she was able to sag against the wall, her knees like sponges, her heart hammering at her ribcage.

She couldn't give in to her weakness yet. With Giselle loose, she didn't know who might be after her next. She grabbed her rifle, ran for the port and prayed she could be off the station before they came. But as she rounded the corner, she encountered a scene of pure chaos: despairing refugees were banging on an access hatch which was firmly sealed and which displayed no docking light. The bus had left, which meant she was trapped. Trapped with the forces massed against her, with the peril which had sent these other people fleeing here. Trapped and doomed, like the rest of them.

Like hell!

The steel-rimmed road was like nothing the H'arthi had seen before. Still, there seemed no other way of leaving the cold, unfriendly, meatless environment it had arrived in, so it dropped down from the concrete and headed for the darkness of the tunnel, where it now stalked the shadows, computer-enhanced senses alert for any opportunity to feed.

What happened next, neither innate nor programmed knowledge had prepared it for. A blast of cold air rippled its fur and made its organic eyelids blink. A great shriek assailed its hyper-sensitive ears and made it want to run and hide. But it was transfixed by a blinding yellow circle of light, which almost overloaded its remaining optical sensor. By the time it registered the fearsome hunter which travelled along the road at a speed it had never imagined, it was too late to avoid its incredible metal bulk. It screamed as the monster hit it and its spine cracked, flesh pulping, muscles ripping. Blood flowed torrentially from its mouth, its back leg shattered and it rolled into a pathetic clump of matted hair and protruding bones at the tunnel's edge. It lay, pining for the hunt it would be unable to finish, but the creature passed by, not bothering to consolidate its victory by delivering death. No doubt it thought its victim extinct already, as many a lesser creature would be after such terrible impact. Even the H'arthi, as it once was, could never have survived. But its new form gave it a stronger constitution,

and its new brain the will power to force its battered frame to rise.

It lurched along the iron road, a twisted parody of its former self. It wouldn't let this body die. It had trails to follow, appointed victims to devour, voracious bloodlust to be satiated.

It would never give up.

The capsule had led to more corridors, but at least Raymond seemed to know his way around. 'I haven't seen my new apartment yet,' he explained, producing a set of keys. 'If we get there, we can turn on Sunlink News, see what they've got to say.'

Someone hurried past them, screaming: 'We're all going to die!'

'That seems to be the general impression,' said Grant uneasily.

'Indeed it is,' a voice boomed behind him. He turned to find two unfamiliar men approaching. The speaker was tall, curly-haired and had evidently been in the wars. His yellow trousers and revolting green-orange waistcoat were mud-spattered, and blood seeped through a denim bandage, tied haphazardly round his left arm.

'Doctor!' exclaimed Raymond, and he flushed almost guiltily.

'Obviously somebody has been rumour-mongering.'

'There's no danger then?'

'I didn't say that, merely that the worst hasn't yet manifested itself. Incidentally, it's good to see you well, Mr Day. I was worried that whatever prevented you from saving my life before might have been serious.' Raymond opened his mouth to reply, but the Doctor forestalled him. 'Never mind that, you're just the person I need to help find Paradox again.

Hurry now, man, it's important.'

'We're solving a geologic condrum,' said the other stranger. Grant shied away from him, praying that the stains on his purple leotard were not what he suspected.

Raymond looked as if he still wanted to speak, but he thought better of it. He turned and led them back the way the Doctor had come. The others followed, Grant trailing behind and wishing he had some idea of what was happening.

Lights. Lights and sound and sickening movement. Strong hands hoisting him, depositing him on a soft mattress. More lights, more sound, a huge face blocking out the brightness.

'Now, Mr Mantelli, if you do insist on thrashing about like that...' Her words slurred, merging into terrible, animal howls (remembering: that woman in the shopping mall, one of Miriam Walker's lot...) and the face, dripping spittle, moving in, he had to fight (... accusing him of saying 'naughty words'

and assaulting him...), kick out with his arms and legs, don't let them hold him down, *don't let them harm me any more* (and the man who ran on set with a bomb strapped to his back), *I am a TV personality, you can't harm me, you can't bring that needle near me!* (and the handkerchiefs and tablets in her handbag, cascading down his body as she hit and hit and hit and the security guards doing nothing, only laughing whilst she belted him and he was so talented, why was life so *unfair* to him?)

No! Take that thing away! (that dripping, huge, inflated syringe, viscous green death pumped into his veins, what were they trying to do to him?) *You can't beat the freedom of the press, I will live!* Get out of here, this dizzy mall (this medical centre), knock the harridan aside, get to your feet, run for your life (the studio audience, chanting together, 'Get off our TV

screens. Leave! Leave!'). A camera stand, pushed out of the way (no, no camera, a trolley. Or monster), falling into the corridor. *I don't belong here, this institution, I must escape, have to be a hero, I am perfectly sane!* Get away from here (only where was he?), run for freedom ('Get out of our lives.

Die! Die!'). Falling into the dark, the grey floor chipping his teeth, arms and legs like lead (and liquid fire in his bloodstream, why were they killing him?), skittering face-first, tears on his collar, fists flailing uselessly, screaming for Daddy to buy him away from here until his throat was red raw.

Then merciful blackness.

Hammond had found the office of the Co-Executive Sub-Associate Programme Controller, a highly paid administrator who effectively did nothing but was the nephew of someone influential. She had learnt enough from the throng at the port to be worried, and this was the nearest place she knew of from which an SOS could be broadcast. She

almost exploded with relief as she burst in to find a light blinking on the comlink.

With a little luck, it was still operational.

The room was a mess, its occupant having evidently left in a hurry. She leapt over an upturned chair, kicked a discarded coat out of the way, dropped her rifle on the desk and leaned over the device, punching buttons urgently. 'Mayday. This is the Meson Broadcasting Service calling all shipping. We have an emergency situation. We need urgent aid to evacuate.

Repeat...' She was halfway through the message a second time when something fizzed in the unit and a fierce burst of static assailed her ears. She cursed and punched the desk, then became startlingly aware of movement behind her.

Brookes was leaning on the door frame, eyes afire, revenge on his mind. He was in a bad condition from his beating. His right arm hung limp, his tunic was dishevelled and a livid purple bruise stood out on his cheek. 'Now come on Dan,' she said, 'you don't want to fight now. This whole station's in trouble, we have to get out while there's still time.'

'Gonna kill you!'

Hammond snapped. 'For once, don't be so bloody mindless!'

Brookes lunged, but she side-stepped him and dealt a punishing blow to the side of his head. He crashed to the floor but gripped her ankle and pulled her on top of him. He had surprising strength, despite his injuries. She kneed him in the stomach and clung to his neck, trying to remain on top whilst he bucked like a madman, hoping to usurp her from that position. He managed to drive his head into her nose and she felt a blood vessel burst, saw the red liquid staining his shirt.

He managed to unbalance her and she staggered, groping behind on the desk for a weapon. She felt her rifle, but her questing hands knocked it out of reach. She grabbed a paperweight instead and hurled it, hitting his chest and knocking him into a bookcase. Heavy volumes fell, glancing off him. His eyes closed and he coughed, as if he were going to vomit blood. Hammond wanted to close in, to attack again, but she was too battered and weary, so she pretended that she didn't. 'I told you,' she said breathlessly, 'I don't want to fight. Whatever there is between us, we can settle later. If there is a later. For now, we need to work together.'

He stared from his semi-prone position, and she figured he had got the message. She turned back to the comlink and worked it with one hand, the other pinching her streaming nose. She couldn't tune out the interference. 'It's no good, we'll have to find another –'

Something slammed against the back of her head and orange spots closed in around the periphery of her vision.

Brookes had grabbed the discarded chair and attacked her from behind. *Damn him!* she thought. *Tenacious and single-minded as a H'arthi, but with only one quarter of the brain power.*

She was unable to stop herself falling. She struggled to regain full awareness before the next blow came.

The reception area at Paradox was deserted now. The Doctor scowled at Dominic Shepherd's image, which stared down at them as they entered. 'If you weren't so greedy and underhand...' He caught the surprised expression of the boy who had accompanied Raymond. 'He's not a friend of yours, I hope?'

'No,' he said hurriedly. He was about nineteen years of age and seemed pleasant enough. He was of medium height and small build, and he wore black corduroy pants and a brown acrylic pullover. His blue, watery eyes were wide and inquisitive, an effect accentuated by large, dirty spectacle lenses. His hair was rusty brown, cut short but growing wild, and his skin was pallid and slightly freckled. He hadn't said much during their journey, but there was an air of interest about him as though he was silently taking in every detail he saw.

'Who are you, by the way?'

'Grant Markham, I –'

'That's enough introductions. We've work to do.'

He led the way down the corridor which had once taken him to Shepherd's office. Before that room, he made a right turn and burst into the *Time of Your Life* control centre. He noticed that the new boy kept close to his side, as if the place scared him. He resented the implicit faith and he tried not to think of Angela, caught up on that ship and almost certainly dead.

To Grant, this all seemed increasingly like some waking dream. He was drifting outside his body, watching as it blundered through a situation which could never happen to him. All he was sure of was

that the warrior bloke gave him the creeps and the Doctor, conversely, engendered an automatic trust for which he couldn't really pin down a reason.

The control room was no longer so magical. Most of the screens were down, but a few shed their green light over the gloom. In an otherwise dark corner of the ceiling, a television flickered and a hurriedly obtained replacement newscaster controlled her voice as she appealed for calm. 'It's true that there is a virus in the systems, but it doesn't necessarily threaten the station directly. There is no cause for alarm.'

The Doctor leapt into a seat before one of the operational consoles. 'I do hope people believe her, it might quell some of the mindless, dangerous panic. Not that what she says is remotely true.'

'What's happening, Doc?' asked Anjor.

'As I suspected, the *Time of Your Life* sphere is attempting to co-exist with the Network.'

'You can stop it though? Like the other one?'

'This time, I want to try something a bit more ambitious.

Raymond, find me a VRTV helmet, there's bound to be one here somewhere. Graham, or whatever your name is, pull back that partition over there. Let's see what we're dealing with.'

Grant frowned, looked around and finally saw the narrow gap in the wall to his right. He approached it and tried to gain purchase with his fingers. The Doctor was relying on him.

Why should that matter? He strained against the unmoving surface and, at last, a section of the wall slid grudgingly back to reveal...

Well, from what he had heard about these Marston Sphere things, he had expected something more. Standing quite unremarkably within the tiny ancillary room he had opened, was a rather shabby grey cube, a dozen feet across. He couldn't help feeling disappointed.

Raymond echoed those sentiments, and one more. 'That isn't actually a sphere,' he pointed out, handing the Doctor a headset he had found beneath a chair.

'Your observational powers astound me. The actual shape, however, doesn't matter. It's the transcendentalism factor that makes the

equipment what it is. That cube is little more than a protrusion into this reality of the extra-dimensional pocket within the Sphere.'

Anjor's eyes had glazed over and Raymond was nodding but not taking much in. 'You mean it's a gateway to a mini-universe?' Grant piped up, bravely.

The Doctor smiled at him encouragingly. 'It's good to know there is still hope for the intelligence of the human species.' Grant glowed with his praise, but then he added:

'You're not right, of course, but it's an adequate explanation of the concept so far as your limited brain could understand it.

Check if there's a door in that thing, would you? I'd hate to have to put my trust in the teleport.'

Sulkily, Grant moved into the hidden chamber and felt around the Marston Sphere's edges. 'There's an outline here,'

he reported presently. 'Do I try to open it?'

'Not yet, George. I have to do something first.' The Doctor stared at his screen. 'Did any of you know that this station is forty-five minutes away from a catastrophic and unavoidable collision with one of your suns? He was met by stunned silence. 'Hmmmm, Sunlink mustn't have discovered that one yet. Still, that's not our main worry.'

'It isn't?' said Raymond.

'The datavore's penetration of the systems is almost complete. In a few minutes, it will have total control over every computer on the Network, and from what I felt of it when our minds touched, I doubt it will use that power benevolently. Anjor, Raymond, Godfrey, I want you to find as many people as you can and send them here. I might just be able to find an escape route before too many of them die.'

'Gotcha, Doc!' said Anjor, and he hurried from the room. A little uncertainly, Raymond followed. Grant, on the other hand, had butterflies in his stomach and the idea of a monster controlling the station's every appliance filled him with dread.

He hesitated. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor glanced up, read his expression and relented.

‘Okay, stay here, but keep out of my way.’

‘Can’t I help?’

‘That depends on what you can do.’

‘I’m a computer programmer.’

‘Have you ever programmed in MANOP-27 using a direct brain interface?’

‘No.’

‘Do you know how to make tea?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Congratulations, you’ve found yourself a use. Now no talking please. I’m going to link with the equipment here via Virtual Reality Television. It’s the only way I can match the datavore for sheer computational speed.’

‘What are you trying to do?’

There was no answer. The Doctor had donned the visor and was concentrating on the task at hand. Grant sighed and checked around the room for anything resembling a kettle.

When nothing presented itself, he sat at one of the terminals instead and experimentally typed a command line. The screen answered: ‘ORGANIC BUGS MUST BE PURGED FROM THE

SYSTEM.’ He shivered and moved to the far end of the room.

By chance, he stumbled upon a cuboid metal box, tacked to the wall, marked ‘REFRESHMENTS’. He couldn’t see any controls, but he soon worked out that it was operated by a touch-sensitive pad. A little warily, remembering Raymond’s warning about the device on the station, he placed his palm onto its surface. The machine lit up red and yellow, and he tentatively ordered: ‘Tea.’ It delivered a glass of sparkling white wine, which he decided was close enough.

He almost dropped the drink as two people barged into the room. ‘Adam Romance said there was a way out here.’

‘There will be soon. Wait by the cube and don’t disturb the guy at the computer.’ Grant watched as they hurried towards the drab grey

shape, their expressions speaking of blind, desperate hope. He wondered who this 'Adam' was.

The seriousness of his own situation was only beginning to sink in. His life was in danger here, even more than it had been during the monster invasion of Neo Tokyo. How long before the Doctor could return him to his home town, he wondered? He hadn't liked to ask with everything else happening, but if anyone could accomplish that...

He was so tense that he almost screamed when a terminal exploded by his side. Something howled, an unnatural high keening drifting from the computers and from the TV screen above, which suddenly fizzed and blinked out with a pop. The sound died and the Doctor snatched off his headset, his face a picture of triumph. 'I've done it! I've sent the city inside the sphere back where it came from, three systems away.'

Grant's face turned ashen and he dropped the glass, which shattered and wet his shoe. The Doctor looked at him curiously.

'You could have told me,' he said pathetically.

It was Raymond who had suggested splitting up. Even so, there was no way two of them could cover the whole station on foot. He was heading for the Sunlink studios, hoping to broadcast the Doctor's message to as many people as were still watching. Anjor would knock on doors in the Class Two and Three apartment districts, Raymond having logically – and correctly – assumed that most Class One residents would have taken the privileged escape pod seats.

The back of his head ached and he found it hard to accept the reality of the situation. This was where he had lived for twenty-one years, these familiar, safe (if somewhat dull) corridors, and he couldn't quite grasp the concept of a threat he had seen little evidence of. He felt lethargic and wished he hadn't drunk so much, although the effects of his intoxication had mostly now worn off. Then an all too familiar figure lurched into view, and thoughts of Raymond's altruistic mission sank beneath a tide of automatic loathing. 'Mantelli!'

The presenter was bedraggled, hair chaotic, his clothes crumpled and his normally ubiquitous shades missing. He reached to Raymond like a man drowning in quicksand.

'Ray... baby.'

'The name is Raymond, you snivelling little pillock.'

‘They’re after me, the aliens from the planet X, they filled me with truth drugs and they want to take over my show, but you can help me can’t you? You’re a star, Ray.’

Raymond laughed hollowly. ‘So cool and collected, aren’t you Zed? What’s up, got dragged off to the infirmary and sedated? All this over a couple of computer problems. I’d hate to see you in a real crisis.’

Mantelli grabbed his jacket and pulled imploringly. ‘Ray, please, you can see them, can’t you? They’re laughing at me, taunting me.’

‘Not laughing yourself any more, I see.’

‘I’ll even make you my co-presenter!’ Raymond prepared a retort – then his eyes met Mantelli’s and he saw the unbearable pain in his enemy’s gaze. In that moment, the actor’s heart went out to this poor, miserable, trembling figure.

Then Mantelli was sick down Raymond’s jacket and he knocked him away, disgusted.

‘Die in agony, jerk!’ he spat. Then he raced away, leaving Mantelli clinging to the wall and sobbing.

Giselle watched, and in the back of her mind she felt some empathy with the defeated man. She would, ordinarily, have dismissed the emotion. It was all entertainment, after all. But now she barely registered the drama being played out on her remaining screens. She watched only out of habit as she waited to die, one thought spinning through her head on an incessant loop: *How could I have been so conceited?*

A producer had climbed into a spacesuit and jumped out of an emergency airlock. An inquiring camera left with him and watched as he drifted, pedalling against the vacuum in a futile attempt to gain distance from the doomed station. Shepherd had returned home and was talking softly to his wife, hoping to prepare her for their imminent fates. The image faded, replaced by cold lettering which spelt KRLLXK.

Her secret evacuation, the sharing of a last few favours, some old enemies punished, how had she thought she’d get away with it? She should have known what would happen.

Her chosen few going straight to friends, those friends spreading word to others, and suddenly a mass exodus, with only the slowest left

behind. Giselle amongst them, when she could so easily have fled at the start. Playing power games had led to her downfall. That and not understanding the concept of human friendship. *Damn them, how could they have betrayed me?*

ORGANIC BUGS MUST BE PURGED FROM THE SYSTEM.

The floundering escapee's suit snagged on a piece of detritus and ripped. The camera recorded his ensuing demise in all its gory detail, but Giselle didn't even blink.

A dozen hopeful evacuees were milling in the ante-room, and the Doctor began to usher them through the opened portal into the Marston Sphere. 'That's your way out, ladies and gentlemen. Wait inside the... erm, cube... and in a few minutes, you'll be on Meson Primus.' There was a murmur of approval as the crowd obeyed. Grant made to follow them, but the Doctor placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I thought you were helping me, Geoff.'

'I couldn't find any tea.'

'You said you could program, didn't you?' He moved back to his terminal and Grant followed, cautious but more than willing to participate. 'It's a simple trick. We make the computer believe there's a city in the Sphere. Then we trigger the failsafe again, and it goes back to where it didn't come from.'

'Taking everyone with it!' Grant concluded.

The Doctor sighed. 'If anyone here cared one iota about safety regulations, they could have worked this out and set up a station-to-planet transmat months ago.'

'Will the virus let you do this?'

'Maybe. The datavore passed through a gateway into the computers of... what did you say it was called?'

'Neo Tokyo. On New Earth.'

'Aha. If I had a grotzit for every unimaginative populace who decided to use that name...'

'It's not like that,' Grant protested. 'I was born on Agora, you see, and _'

‘An agricultural planet, no doubt. How equally creative.’

Grant glared at him. ‘Anyway, when I returned your home to its proper location, it took a part of the creature’s essence with it. You heard the scream! It must have been like having an arm ripped off. It should take a while to recover.’

‘Which gives us time to round everyone up and teleport them out?’

‘In theory, yes. But this computer tells me there are currently five hundred and twenty-three living people on the station. That’s some round up.’

He put on the headset again and said no more. Grant waited expectantly, but the Doctor was fully submerged in his work.

Lost for something to do, he turned once more to the nearest keyboard.

The programming language seemed similar to that which had generated the monsters back home, but that was unfamiliar to him at the best of times, and trying to navigate around an intelligent virus had to be well beyond his capabilities. Despite his eagerness, he didn’t see what he could do. Then something caught his attention and he cried out in joy. ‘Doctor!’

His companion jumped, ripped off the headset and glowered at him when he saw there was no immediate threat.

‘You don’t have to use the Sphere,’ Grant told him.

‘According to this, there’s another ship about to dock.’

The Doctor gave his monitor no more than a cursory glance. ‘Then I feel sorry for the pilot,’ he said. Without warning, his face crumpled and he punched his fist through the screen. He sucked air through his teeth bitterly as he extracted his hand and nursed the thin cuts he had given himself.

‘Another meaningless death,’ he said quietly.

Hammond groaned and tried to roll. The chair leg had been snapped free by the terrible jarring impact and it thudded to the floor, catching her a glancing blow to the arm as it passed.

Brookes was standing over her. He could have pressed the attack,

could have finished it there and then, but he was still unsteady on his feet. Sweat pricked his forehead and his breathing was shallow and laboured.

She managed to drag herself from the path of his next lunge. The chair's remains hit by her head and splintered.

Brookes yelped as a sliver of wood entered his palm. She took advantage of the distraction, leaping to her feet, trying to ignore the sickening lurch inside her head and sweeping a bulging file off the desk. It wouldn't hurt him, but he dodged instinctively. While he was still off balance, she put everything she had into one solid punch across the jaw. It wasn't good enough. He staggered, but remained standing. His eyes were staring, red and crazed. He was coming in for a fresh onslaught.

'MBS station,' a voice crackled from the desk. The pair ceased battling at the interruption. Even in Brookes's frenzied gaze, hope glistened. 'MBS station, this is Quincy Warner of the freight ship *Drydock IV*.' Hammond recovered before Brookes did and she edged around towards the fallen weapon on the desk's far side. 'Your mayday is received. I have space for two hundred and fifty evacuees and can rendezvous in approximately twenty-five minutes, do you copy? Over.'

Brookes was still staring at the miraculously restored comlink, as if only now understanding that he might survive this after all. Hammond had her rifle back and it was screaming in her mind, urging her to show no mercy. 'Shut up you,' she muttered before turning to her foe. 'Now will you help me, or do I let this thing kill you? We have to get to engineering, make sure that ship can dock.'

Brookes nodded slowly, but Hammond wasn't about to trust him so easily. She kept the gun trained as she operated the communications unit and sent an acknowledgement to Warner.

Partway through her message, the device exploded.

Giselle sat and watched, as ever, a solitary tear frozen on one immobile cheek. Her screens were cycling, unbidden, through all their myriad perspectives of Network life. She saw the Xyron robots prowling the Wolf Extension and the faulty socket which electrocuted poor, unsuspecting Val Reed in her own flat. She heard wails and screams and odd snatches of panicked conversation. And what her monitors spared her, her computer provided in harsh detail.

Radar had picked up the approaching ship. All messages to and from it had been automatically transcribed and relayed to her. She had seen the inevitable coming and might, in retrospect, have been able to caution Hammond in time. What matter was that now? Even as the former Security Chief had acknowledged her longed-for salvation, the intruder had transmitted a rogue program which had, impossibly,

piggy-backed onto her subspace carrier wave and rode its frequency back to the *Drydock*.

The camera which had left the station found a second tragedy to relay. It afforded Giselle a ringside view of the fireworks as the rescue ship was blown spectacularly apart from within. It didn't mean much. She had not held any hope out anyway. She would die here, in front of her monitor screens. She had conducted her whole life from this room, it seemed appropriate that it should end here.

In the Programme Controller's office, the *Timeriders* fans were singing 'We shall not be moved,' but George had collapsed over his glass of water and even Lucinda was beginning to show symptoms of heat exhaustion.

'Angela was a friend,' said the Doctor, his voice low and heavy. 'I didn't know her for long, but I...' He abandoned that line of thought. 'I last saw her on the ship. The one our friendly techno-virus rode in on.'

Grant didn't know what to say. He was horrified at the Doctor's revelation, and it brought Stuart's image swimming inexorably into his mind. He hadn't thought of him for an hour or more, and that made him feel horribly guilty. 'She... might still be alive though, mightn't she?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'One more casualty on my road to self-destruction. If only I had realized what the Time Lords wanted, why they set me down on that ship in the first place.

But I was too busy pouting and preening and jumping to all the wrong conclusions to even care.'

They were interrupted as more refugees raced in. Grant ushered them into the cube. The Doctor was back under the headset by the time he was done. He was working again, muttering under his breath and intermittently punching the terminal with his good hand. His brief expression of emotion seemed forgotten. Grant watched him work, but couldn't make sense of the characters which filled the screen. He wanted to help. No, he wanted to impress. More, to ride this fascinating stranger's coat-tails to a new-found scientific understanding.

The possibilities made him breathless. 'If you told me what you were trying to do...' he finally ventured.

To his surprise, the Doctor answered him. 'This terminal should be

able to govern the parameters of the Marston Sphere's existence, but the datavore has stolen all the information from the system. I have to both replace it and modify it for my own use, but the creature has a physical presence here, a monofilament of its own being extended into the computers. It devours anything I program in, almost before I can program it.'

'Surely a simple virus-buster should get rid of that?'

'Expelling it isn't the problem. What I need to do is erect a barrier strong enough to prevent its return.'

'I thought it was wounded.'

'It was. It recovered. It's extremely resilient.'

'Doctor, why does this... this *kilik* thing do what it does?

Steal information, I mean.'

'For the sake of it. It can't do anything with the data, it has no imagination. It can only take facts and regurgitate them.'

'What's the point?'

'Who knows? An artificial learning system? A tool for industrial espionage?'

'It was manufactured then?'

The Doctor took the VRTV visor off. 'Can we save the questions? The datavore's infiltration is almost complete. It's taking over the last few systems as we speak.'

Grant pressed on, regardless of his colleague's obvious irritation. 'But it's taking over separate systems.'

'Yes.'

'Through hardware abstraction layers?'

'I suppose so.'

'Then why not virtualize a different layer for this one? Say, one that's in constant flux. That should stall it at least.'

'That's...' The Doctor choked his disparaging remark back.

'... quite feasible!' he finished, taken aback. 'Well done, Gordon, I knew you'd come in useful.' Grant suppressed a grin of pride, but his triumph was short-lived.

The letters on the screen vanished, to be replaced by a stream of even more incomprehensible numbers. The Doctor breathed in sharply and pulled away. 'It's quicker than I thought. I'm too late.'

'For what?'

'The organism has achieved its objective,' said the Doctor.

'It has control over every computer-operated appliance on this station.'

'Which means?'

The screen told him. ORGANIC BUGS MUST BE PURGED FROM

THE SYSTEM.

Then, more succinctly: YOU DIE.

Eleven

s this thing on?' Raymond looked at the camera du

'I biously. Sunlink's one remaining technician gave him the thumbs up. She had managed to arrange for him to appear live on all sixteen channels simultaneously. He cleared his throat and began.

'This is an urgent message for anyone still on the Network.

A deadly virus has entered the computers. Don't use any machines. Make your way as fast as you can to Paradox Productions, on Gaslight Promenade. An evacuation is being organized from there.' He turned to the technician. 'Put that on a loop tape, will you? The more people see it, the more get to live.'

The woman nodded, reached for the relevant switch and was blasted across the room as it exploded at her touch. Her head cracked against the wall and blood seeped from her skull.

Raymond rushed over and felt for a pulse. She was beyond helping.

He'd done his bit. Now things were getting dangerous.

Time to take his own advice, he thought.

Mrs Walker gasped as a metal arm in khaki punched through the wall and grabbed her hair. She wrenched free, the effort bringing tears to her eyes, and she hurried to join Firn Kaerson in the room's centre. 'What are they?'

'Animatronic soldiers,' he said. The arm was thrashing and sparking, trapped by the jagged edges of the hole it had created. One mechanoid immobilized, but there were plenty more out there. 'From a new Network Two show about the evils of war.'

'About its gratuitous glorification, more like.'

'They were cannon fodder. They're programmed to simulate death, many times over, without sustaining damage.'

The mass of furniture he had piled against the door was beginning to slide relentlessly across the room. 'There's no other entrance,' he reminded her unnecessarily.

She shook her head sadly. 'I knew this evil medium would be the finish of me.'

'What the hell is that?' Brookes yelled.

'Didn't you watch *Timeriders*, Danny boy?' said Hammond. 'That's a Xyron. Harmless, but don't let it too close. They've been running amok, grabbing people and dropping them three corridors away.'

Brookes scowled and backed off. The robot, still a hundred metres ahead, seemed to notice them. It began to approach.

'There must be somewhere else we can radio for help from.'

'We could try Giselle's office.' Hammond turned and jumped, alarmed, as the Xyron struck. Its segmented tube lashed out at her, not close enough to grip but snapping painfully across her cheek like a cat-o'-nine-tails. She cursed loudly.

Let me deal with it.

She obliged her rifle, pumping three blasts into her attacker's chest. It slowed, but not enough. 'Let's go.' She turned, but Brookes was already out of sight. She muttered under her breath and followed him,

diving beneath a second attack and wiping blood from her face ruefully. ‘What’s going on? That thing’s actually trying to hurt me!’

You see? You need me after all.

Mike and Roderick were arguing the relative merits of *Timeriders* over *Private Hospital*. Lucinda and Colin sat sulking, whilst Mary attempted to buoy the group’s spirits by continuing to sing alone. George could feel a migraine coming on, and he popped a fifth tablet from its bubblepak. He headed for the vendor and placed his palm against its touch-sensitive pad. A jet of scalding water blurted out and struck him between the eyes.

Lucinda was on her feet in a second, horrified. Mary’s jaw dropped and she didn’t know what to do. George collapsed, his hands to his face. Then the strip light exploded with almost malicious force, showering the room with electrical sparks which set fire to the carpet, to the back of Colin’s chair and to Mary’s blouse.

Blinded, Lucinda rubbed her eyes, trying to blink away the sunburst effect on the back of her eyelids. She could smell something sharp and tangy. Petroleum. Her clothes were streaked with black. What had oil been doing in the lighting system?

Mary shrieked, paralysed with terror, and Roderick didn’t help much by attempting to beat out the smouldering fabric with his bare hands. Mike had a lungful of smoke and he was coughing and spluttering by the desk. Colin stumbled across the suddenly dark office, heaved on the door handle and cried for assistance. But the door was locked and soundproofed, and no one would bother to listen anyway.

Glynda protested vigorously as Anjor bustled her out of her cell. ‘Unhand me, you – you –’ What was it Mrs Walker had said at the last CATS meeting? ‘– *uncouth ruffian*!’

He pushed her roughly along the corridor, and she noticed that the other doors were open too. ‘No time for that, you’re the last one in here. Your life’s in danger.’

‘What are you –?’ Her question was never finished. A siren alarm wailed out its riot warning and a thick, barred security gate slid across their path and locked with a disconcertingly final clang. She screamed, and Anjor squeezed her hand reassuringly.

‘The virus whatsit thinks we’re trapped.’ He strode up to the obstruction, took hold of two adjoining bars and pulled.

Glynda marvelled as his chest and shoulder muscles rippled attractively and inflexible steel was moulded like putty by his efforts.

Then she registered what he had not: a standard issue security rifle, aimed at his head. He hadn't seen it because no one held it. It was hovering in mid-air on the far side of the gate. She shouted a warning and they dropped, his bulk feeling comfortable atop her, his sweat exciting her sense of smell.

The weapon emptied its power pack above their heads, then clattered to the floor exhausted. Anjor was back up immediately, finishing the job he had started. 'Never seen a telepathic gun do that before. Must be the virus's fault.' He stepped back to admire his handiwork. Glynda imagined it would have been possible to drive a hoverbus between the bars now. He ushered her before him with a polite smile. 'Ladies first.' She walked gingerly through the gap, but her gaze remained fixed on his rough and craggy but strangely kind features, and her eyes twinkled with a newfound inner light.

Not again!

A robot clanked into the control room, and Grant yelled and pushed the Doctor down beneath his console. The repulsive thing looked like some cartoon bunny, standing upright, fashioned in steel. It wore dark glasses (of all things) and wielded a rifle. It didn't mind using it. With a maniacal cry of

'Gotta die now, buddies!' it emptied a full clip of bullets into the room. They ricocheted off every conceivable surface, monitors shattering, plastic chips flying off consoles which fused and exploded beneath the tumultuous barrage.

Just like that, it was over. The shooting, at least. Grant felt the Doctor haul him to his feet and he was pushed away, his terror-blinded eyes only now taking in the new danger. Out of ammunition, the rabbit was going for a more frontal assault. It vaulted with surprising and frightening agility over the first row of computers, landing between its two victims and turning towards him. It sprang and he ran, pushing chairs into its path only to see them splinter as it thundered through them, an obsessive dreadnought, coming straight at him.

He looked to the Doctor for salvation, but to his horror the Time Lord was back at the computers, hurriedly donning his discarded VRTV visor. 'Lure it out of here, I can't leave my work,' he shouted. Easier said than done. He feinted left, tried to misdirect it and lost his

footing, howling as it slapped a fist across his cheek. His head ringing, his eyes unfocused, it took him a second to see that he was on the floor and that he'd slid between its legs. Its ludicrously floppy white cartoon feet were planted one by each of his ears. While it tried to reorient itself, he dragged his body through the gap and sprinted for the exit.

He chanced a look back over his shoulder and it was behind him again, gaining ground.

As he reached the exit, he cannoned straight into a new arrival: an evacuee, though he didn't immediately appreciate it. Both leapt back, panicked, Grant straight into his nemesis's clutches. The monster gripped his shoulders, spun him round and slammed him against the wall. He fell before it, throwing both hands up in a useless warding off gesture. It leered at him as it deliberately reached into its belt and reloaded its weapon.

It jabbed the barrel into his throat.

'Gotta die now, baby!'

Grant screamed like he had never screamed before.

Raymond's broadcast had given Giselle fresh hope. Could this really be true? Her logical mind was checking through the possibilities, slowly reaching the conclusion that she might just be able to survive.

Even so, she had not moved. Her monitors had relayed the horrific sight of the Loop disaster: all four trains, diverted so as to meet in one huge, metal-rending collision. Fortunately, not many had trusted to that mode of transport. Those that had were dying in agony. She couldn't tear her eyes away, although voyeuristic pleasure had long since been supplanted by revulsion. She shivered and looked up with staring red eyes as something metal shifted in the recesses of the ceiling.

Almost too late, she figured out what. She flung herself beneath her desk as the sprinklers engaged, shaking as she waited out the hissing storm of undiluted acid.

When the downpour was over, she scrambled out and stood forlornly in the ruined mess that once had been her empire's hub. Her precious briefcase was a misshapen lump, her screens were distorted and bubbling and she knew that, at last, it was over. She had to get out of here.

She faltered in the doorway. There were six members of the Nostralian Society of Cult Television trapped in the inner office. An hour ago, that wouldn't have bothered her. Now, she couldn't leave them to face the hopelessness of certain doom. She pulled a protective sleeve down over her hand and stabbed gingerly at the control which should release the door's locking mechanism. It didn't work, but the door itself was part molten, rivulets of acid dripping down scarred wood. She lifted her chair. She might be able to break through.

Morris hurtled along Canal Street, swerving and jumping randomly, miraculously avoiding the laser beams which stabbed at him from behind. He threw himself down the nearest side passage, and almost leapt back into firing range when he collided with Raymond Day.

At first, his brain couldn't accept it. He trembled and shouted, thrashed his arms about and shrank away from this impossibility. Then his attacker appeared at the junction and a sadistic grin lit his face as he took aim. It was true. There were two of them!

'You imbecile, that's my hologram!' said the second Raymond – the real one, he recognized at last, with a mixture of relief and embarrassment. The hologram laughed, fired at point blank range... and missed. Or rather, the beam crackled through Morris and faded like the insubstantial light image it was.

Raymond laughed. 'It serves you right for going along with that thing.'

'It wasn't my fault, I –'

'Never mind that. Where were you running to?'

'Mr Shepherd's flat,' he said, trying to ignore the cry of

'Die Morris, you scum!' and the second shot from behind him.

'I thought he could help.'

'More likely, he'd use you to distract the first threat you came across. Or eat you, if things got too rough.' Morris didn't have the spirit to argue. 'Come on, we're going to Paradox.

There's a way out there. I'll explain on the way.' Raymond set off towards his doppelgänger, which was still glowering at them, blocking their path. 'As for you, mate...' He pushed through it with a dismissive, almost vicious, swipe of the elbow.

To Morris's alarm, there was a fizz and a pungent burning smell. The hologram dissipated and Raymond was thrown against the wall with a resounding crack. He slid to the floor, unconscious, but the shock had not been strong enough to kill.

The actor was breathing, and Morris hovered fretfully, not daring to touch him. He wanted to help, but if he dragged Raymond's dead weight along with him, they would both be easy prey.

No, his fevered mind assured him, there was only one thing to do. Leaving Raymond to his fate, he hurried off towards Paradox alone.

'Shoot them!' yelled Brookes. He grabbed Hammond's rifle barrel and jerked it around to face the oncoming mass. The gang of pirates – a score or more – were almost on them, their bloodcurdling war cry echoing around the corridor deafeningly.

Hammond pulled the weapon away and glared at him. 'You idiot, they're extras from that Cornerstone programme. Some of the first holograms used on TV. They can't hurt us.'

They looked quite incongruous in their old-fashioned jerkins and stereotypical Jolly Roger hats. Brookes deliberately put his head down and began to march through them, his bottom lip protruding sulkily, determined to make up for his lapse of courage. He cried out as he collided with soft flesh and, unprepared for the impact, he fell.

'Avast, me heartie!' Hanging back from the rampaging crowd, one very solid pirate placed a boot on his stomach and leered down at him with a gap-toothed grin. He whipped a cutlass from his belt and pulled it back over his head.

Hammond's rifle intercepted the downward swing with a painful clang of metal on metal.

The delay gave Brookes the time he needed to recover his wits. He rolled to his feet, snatched the gun from his companion's hands and emptied its power pack into the would-be buccaneer's chest. He swayed, looked down at his wounds with an expression of disbelief and finally dropped, quite dead, to the floor. Hammond looked at the fallen body, despairingly. 'It's incredible what some people will do in a crisis.'

Glynda was still reeling from the bloodshed in the *Death-Hunt* studio when she and Anjor ran into the soldiers outside. They were almost realistically human, only their complexions and frozen expressions

betraying mechanical origins. They wore the uniforms of soldiers from all eras of Earth history, from World War II Nazis to Roman centurions to the corporate raiders of the mid twenty-first century. Anjor readied the gun he had taken from a dead security officer, but he didn't seem to need it. The mechanoids ignored them, concentrating their efforts on breaking into the technical centre. They had almost succeeded.

'Are you sure they're in there?'

'Well those things are after someone!' said Anjor, bluntly.

Then Glynda heard Mrs Walker scream and her heart leapt with anxiety. 'They are!' She flushed hotly and grabbed the gun.

'That won't work,' said Anjor. She didn't listen. She pumped six blasts into the crowd and, to her satisfaction, the soldiers dropped with frighteningly authentic death rattles.

Whilst Anjor watched, agape, Glynda leapt over the bodies and hammered on the remains of the door. Her hand went straight through and she fell into the room, where she was almost hit by the upraised chairs of its two occupants, waiting in hopeless ambush.

'What happened?' asked Kaerson, amazed.

Glynda brandished her weapon proudly, then caught Mrs Walker's eye and dropped it. 'They weren't real,' she justified herself.

'Of course,' said Kaerson. 'Stunt extras, programmed to drop at the first sign of shooting.'

'Then we'd better go,' said Mrs Walker, 'before this *krillix* overrides that programming.'

They were halfway through the eerie field of corpses when a hand clenched spasmodically around Mrs Walker's ankle.

She screamed and Kaerson dived for the gun, loosing three shots at the mechanoid's wrist. It surrendered its grip and the quartet ran.

In their wake, the soldiers began to rise, like the ghosts of some time-lost battlefield.

Morris started when he heard his name, relaxed when he saw who had called it, then became worried again when he saw the state that Dominic Shepherd was in. His normally immaculate suit was

dishevelled, his tie was missing and his eyes were red and wild.

'Morris, I am so glad to see you,' he said – which didn't sound like him at all. 'They invaded my flat, Melissa... my wife... she's...' His voice cracked and he began to sob, leaning incredibly against the shorter man for support. Morris wasn't sure he could hold him for long. He certainly didn't know how to comfort him. Their relationship had always been an unequal one, with Shepherd caustic and condescending to him at best.

Even so, Morris trusted him implicitly and believed him the one man who could save both their lives.

'What happened?'

'It was... it was Cricklestone's Mummy.' Shepherd pulled away and wiped his sleeve across his eyes. 'It burst in and attacked. I tried to pull it away, but it... suffocated her.'

Morris suppressed the insane urge to laugh. 'We've got to get to Paradox, sir,' he said as gently as he could, although his voice was higher in pitch than normal. 'They're evacuating the station from there.'

Shepherd nodded, subdued. He glanced around to get his bearings, then set off wearily. 'Come on then, let's see if we can get this nightmare over with.'

Relieved that the producer was at least taking the lead again, Morris took up his accustomed position at Shepherd's heels.

They were all mad!

They had turned against him, pursuing him around the station, trying to hound him from the job he had earned through tenacity and merit. But if he hid, cowered in the shadows of this dark corner, apart from the main thoroughfares, away from the cries and the screams and all the sounds and smells of death... maybe he could live while the rest of them were slaughtered?

Only... that stench, that rotting meat odour... the animal figure lurking in darkness, bones twisted and mangled, fur matted with thick blood... why was it looking at him? Why was its snake-like red tongue slithering out between jagged teeth and dribbling expectantly? What was that disgusting, wet, squelching thing it stood on, its limbs splayed, looking horribly like it had once been human and alive?

It was one of them, like everything else, and it was going to kill him. There was no escaping this time.

Mantelli stared, petrified, at the H'arthi creature and his lower lip began to tremble.

Mike stumbled out of the Programme Controller's office first, gasping for air and coughing black bile up onto Giselle's carpet. Mary and Roderick were huddled together, blistered and sore, and even Lucinda was uncharacteristically subdued.

'We're going down to the Loop system,' Giselle said curtly. 'They're playing "Attack of the Special Effects Monsters" on the upper levels.'

'What's happening?' asked Cohn.

'Never mind that, just move.'

'What's that whining sound?'

'Get out of here!'

Giselle heaved her six charges out of the door and followed them as all sixteen monitors exploded, blowing deadly shards of glass across the office only a half-second too late.

Anjor threaded through the colonnades and fountains of Celebration Boulevard, alert for possible hazards. He soon found one. He leapt back, using his trunk-like arms as a barrier to his three colleagues. Before them, a fountain gurgled and sprayed boiling green water in a vertical jet towards the ceiling. The quartet dived for cover behind support pillars, covering bare skin as best they could. Anjor was up as soon as the danger was over, but he was not fast enough. Under cover of the deluge, a golden humanoid android with a spherical, moonlike head and wide appealing eyes had rapidly approached.

'No, Charley. You mustn't do that to the cat. Not with the vicar coming to dinner.' Its hands shot to the warrior's throat.

They gripped with inhuman strength and Anjor felt the breath evacuating his lungs.

'How many of these animatronic things are there?' Miriam Walker wailed.

Glynda pounded ineffectively on the mechanical man's back, hot tears

of rage sliding down her shivering cheeks. ‘Get off him, leave him alone you bastard!’

‘ *Glynda*!’

Kaerson joined the rescue attempt. He couldn’t fire for fear of hitting someone, so he dropped the rifle and tried to prise metal fingers one by one from Anjor’s neck. To his surprise, he succeeded. One huge hand came free, but wrapped itself around his own and squeezed. He could feel his bones shattering.

Anjor managed to pull free, but his attacker turned with unexpected speed and clamped both arms around Glynda’s waist. ‘Oh really Charley, what have I told you about crossing the road without looking?’ She screamed as it dragged her unceremoniously to the fountain. Steam still rose from the coloured water in its basin.

Before anyone could move to stop it, it pushed down on Glynda’s forehead, tilting her back and sending her head first into the blistering liquid.

Grant had always tried not to let the warnings deter him. Tales of industrial excesses; machinery gone berserk; killer androids lurking in every shadow to strike down unwary humans. Oh, Agora was full of such wisdoms. Even when he’d fled to the recently established New Earth colony, he had taken along the fears they’d instilled in him. Today, for the first time, they all seemed cruelly well-founded.

The rabbit smelt of oil and grease. Gears whirred in its bulky chest. Its gun was cold and painful against his oesophagus. He closed his eyes and prayed for a miracle.

Suddenly it squealed, an unearthly electronic lament. It dropped the weapon, lost all sense of balance, pirouetted twice and crashed gracelessly into a bullet-ridden terminal. Only then did Grant see the goggles around its eyes and the Doctor, standing over it, well satisfied. ‘I didn’t think Bloodsoak Bunny’s brain would be able to cope with a forcible input of random programming.’ His expression darkened as he looked at Grant, lying rooted, breathing heavily. ‘I thought you were supposed to be intelligent.’

‘I’m... scared of robots.’

‘Well that makes you next to useless, doesn’t it?’ The comment hurt. The Doctor didn’t appear to care. He bent by the fallen monster’s side and carefully removed the headset. It didn’t stir. ‘A total crash! I just

hope the equipment isn't damaged. With the consoles shattered, VRTV is the only interface I have.'

'Should I go into the Sphere?' asked Grant sulkily, but the Doctor was already immersed again.

'We've lost valuable time,' he muttered. 'The technobeing almost broke through my defences. I don't know if I can salvage things.'

Grant kept quiet and crossed his fingers – more for the absence of further robots than for anything else.

Shoot it. Scatter its innards!

'I can't see you being much use against that thing,'

muttered Hammond. Brookes scowled, believing her words were meant for him.

HE treats me better than you do!

Somehow, Killer Kat looked even more frightening in reality than on the *Bloodsoak Bunny* show. A seductive purr rippled from its voice box and fire sparked from its whiskers.

The effect spread until electricity coruscated in rings around its torso. Hammond tensed and urged her companion back. He resisted her push, a pathetic whine escaping his throat. She turned and saw why. Approaching from the rear was an even more incredible machine. Of similar sphere-based construction, it was large and hunchbacked, bristling with spines which, on closer inspection, proved to be open-ended.

'Power Porcupine,' Brookes whispered.

'You mean you watch this stuff?'

The automatons closed in. 'Well, at risk of being killed by something that stupid, I know which looks least dangerous.

Rush porky, on three.' She was still counting when Brookes shoved her into the cat's path. They collided, blue energy encircling her and crackling through her bone marrow. Human and mechanoid twisted in a macabre, slow-motion waltz, and Hammond saw a blurred image of Brookes as he slipped by.

Then the porcupine attacked and he was blasted by a hail of dart-like

projectiles, shot from its quills. Her attacker's body sheltered her from the barrage.

Hammond pulled free, lurched six steps and fell against the wall. At least the animal was only a prop; its makers had been more interested in light shows than in lethal jolts. Still, if it hadn't been for her insulated tunic...

Her vision cleared and she set off at an unsteady trot, hoping that the robots were as ponderous as they looked.

Before her, Brookes was hopping along, plucking needles from his arms and back. *That treacherous weakling!* the rifle spat. Hammond silently concurred. *He looks like a pin cushion. Put him out of his misery.*

She raised it to her shoulder and kicked in the automatic targeting before she fully comprehended what she was doing.

'Oh, what the hell!' she said, and fired anyway. The weapon laughed in her mind as Brookes fell.

It feels good, doesn't it?

They were shooting looters in Central Mall. Some were fighting back, the situation deteriorating into an irrational morass of screaming faces, flailing fists and flying glass.

Morris didn't want to enter, but Shepherd insisted it was the fastest route to safety. They hugged the wall and tried to keep out of sight, but they were out of luck.

An officer stepped in front of them. His face was a massive bruise with an evil sneer, and his gun was jammed up Shepherd's left nostril. The producer felt an uncontrollable surge of rage and, in an instant, the officer was down, coughing blood, and Shepherd was dragging Morris to the exit.

Time seemed to freeze, and a collective gasp rose from the people in the atrium's centre. The colourful *Kartoon Kapers* fountain was spouting black viscous fluid. The pressure increased a hundredfold, oil impacting with the ceiling four storeys up and showering down upon the erstwhile rioters.

They were shouting and spluttering and running for cover, petty squabbles forgotten. Shepherd ran for the closest door, pushing the dumbfounded Morris before him and throwing him to the floor as they

reached what he hoped was a safe distance.

The heating control system exploded. A blazing fireball coagulated over Central Mall, and a tremendous wave of heat gusted across Dominic Shepherd's back, drawing tears from his eyes. He tried to ignore the agonized screams and the acrid smell of charred flesh as the oil-drenched clothes of those dozens who were left behind ignited.

Raymond woke in a strange place, his head pounding, with no clear idea of why he had passed out. It was not an unfamiliar experience. But then he became aware that the pounding wasn't just another hangover, it was real. It was in the floor and the walls and the whole corridor around him. It was coming closer.

He panicked, not knowing which way to turn. He ran in one direction, but that seemed to take him closer to the vibrations.

He tried the other way, but that did the same. Too late, it struck him that the sounds came from below. With a cacophonous screech of twisting metal and splintering wood, a monolithic green reptilian head forced itself through the floor and, for an instant, Raymond came face-to-face with a red-eyed, slobbering creature out of a nightmare. Or at least out of a bad monster movie. Then the floor buckled and he slid through a jagged gap, plunging a greater distance than he liked to imagine before something thick and metallic cracked across his back and slammed him heavily to the ground.

He was on the Loop track, the mechanical monstrosity towering over him, its great body protruding through to the level above but still hunched over, battering cramped shoulders against the ceiling with a frenzied determination to break through. Its tail thrashed from side to side; it was this which had swatted him on his way down. He had broken two ribs, and breathing was difficult. He dragged his aching body along the line, spots swimming before his eyes, knowing only that he had to escape this dangerous madhouse.

Then came a tremendous crash and an ominous rumble as the monster ruptured the station's main water storage tank and an unstoppable torrent began to pursue Raymond along the tunnel.

Giselle had hoped the subway might be safe. After the train collision, perhaps the intruder wouldn't pay much heed to what happened there. But to reach Gaslight Promenade without running up against the crash site, she had to lead her group on a tortuous path through the narrow, barely used maintenance tunnels, and the strain was

beginning to tell.

Mike was wheezing and fighting for breath. Colin guided George along as he kept a handkerchief clamped over his burnt eyes. Roderick, in between blowing on his scorched hands, was complaining about their 'rather circuitous escape route'.

With hardly a warning, a wall of water hit them like concrete and they were knocked from their feet, lifted helplessly in the clutches of the voluminous wave. They cascaded along the tunnel, bursting out at Abbey Road Station, where the tide seemed to slow. Giselle struck out for the platform and hauled herself onto it. Roderick joined her, coughing and flapping like a stranded fish. She managed to reach out and grab Lucinda, dragging her to shore and to safety. She saw George desperately thrashing, unable to open his eyes to see where he was. He vanished beneath the surface, and of Colin, Mike and Mary there was no sign at all.

Giselle was about to leap back in for them when something shot into her field of vision. She relaxed, seeing that it was only a camera. It hovered at eye-level, crackling with a strong ozone smell. 'Get back,' she warned the others, 'that thing has a 400 volt power source. If it's routed it through the casing...'

The camera hung for a moment longer, as if mocking her.

Then it dropped like a stone into the water.

'Now, if you do go swimming, you must remember your comb.'

Glynda had stopped kicking. Anjor, Miriam Walker and Firn Kaerson were fighting to pull her attacker away from the fountain. Kaerson knew he would never look at *Charley's Android* in the same way again. What was he thinking of? He would most likely never look at anything again!

The mechanoid pulled back, too suddenly. It had let go of its own volition. It turned on them and they scattered. 'I do wish you would take your tablets, Charley. You won't get any better until you do.' Its voice was soft, reassuring, well-modulated and utterly infuriating. It lashed out, almost catching Kaerson across the head. It followed him as he backed away, and Mrs Walker rushed to her forgotten colleague's side. She wasn't breathing.

'Glynda, dear,' she wailed, 'what has this wicked place done to you?' A camera closed in and she stared at it, an expression of horror

dawning on her features. She dropped Glynda's body and leapt for it, trying to punch it from the sky.

'You horrid thing, young children could imitate what you've just broadcast. Go away, shoo I say, shoo!'

Things had seemed so normal this morning. Now Dominic Shepherd was in the grip of a science-fiction monster, one of the blasted *Timeriders* androids, and no matter how he hammered on it, he did nothing but bruise his knuckles.

He was face to dome with the Xyron, its coiled arm wrapped around his waist. Morris trotted beside them, surprisingly calmer. Admittedly, his face had frozen into a tableau of worry, and sweat stood out on his forehead and cheeks, but the kidnapper itself didn't seem to bother him much more than did the situation in general.

'They've been malfunctioning all day sir, it's been on the news.' His voice came out staccato as he gulped in frequent short breaths of air. 'They pick people up, carry them a few hundred metres and drop them.'

Shepherd scowled. 'Well let's hope nothing attacks while I'm trapped with it.'

Morris hadn't considered that, and the thought turned him white. Then the Xyron stopped and Shepherd exhaled thankfully. 'It's doing it, sir, it's letting go.'

It turned to its right and pushed him up against the wall. He felt its grip slacken and he closed his eyes, trying to control his fear. Then he felt his legs, unsupported, swinging in space behind him, and he heard Morris screaming. He opened his eyes to see the corridor lurch forward away from him. His brain raced and came up with a most unpleasant conclusion.

He was being stuffed down the access port of a waste disposal unit, and as the Xyron retracted its tentacle with a snap, he floundered and tried to gain purchase on the hatch's side. It was too late. He plummeted back, head-first, his terrified yells reaching no one as the hatch slammed shut above him and the sound of grinding gears rose from below.

Raymond had managed, somehow, to outrun the torrent.

Fortunately, he had been close to the station at Coronation Terrace

and he watched now from its platform, exhausted, as ten tons of water surged out from the tunnel and gradually settled.

He wasn't prepared for what awaited him as he tottered painfully onto the concourse. An animatronic knight approached, armour clanking against the concrete ground, swiping blindly with a rusted axe. He recognized it from *Horror Mansions*, another television effect running wild. He feinted left and it lunged. He ran right, ignoring the stabbing pain as his ribs ground together. It wasn't built for speed, but it did have strength and accuracy. He couldn't afford to let it hit him, even once.

One anti-gray capsule was working, bouncing playfully in its tube. He knew he could reach it, leaving his lumbering opponent behind. This was the nearest station to his home, only one stop down from Paradox. He was practically free.

With a cold feeling of premature relief he yanked the door open... and screamed as the frigid, brittle corpse of Terry Marston flopped out of the compartment, its skeletal hands seeming to reach for him, to claw at his face...

He tumbled, coughing and gagging, managed to roll from beneath the body, tried to stagger to his feet and looked up through tear-filled, bleary eyes as the robotic knight approached.

It brought its axe down and parted Raymond's head cleanly from his shoulders.

Zed Mantelli was breathless and near petrified, but he had reached safety at last. At least, his fervently racing mind told him so. He was in an office, the door was barricaded shut behind him, the desk pushed against it. Surely nothing could reach him now?

He remembered the H'arthi, its horrible twisted shape looming large in his thoughts. He had believed himself dead, but it had simply stared at him with its one piercing eye, then resumed the freshly killed meal it had made of some other unfortunate. He had been lucky, this time. Even befuddled as he had been for the past hour, Mantelli had known better than to push that luck further. He had turned and run, and he hadn't stopped until he had found this place.

His heart leapt as he saw the drinks vendor. Computer operated. He pulled it, with insane strength, from the wall, grabbed a clump of wires and yanked them free with no thought to the possible consequences. Luck was with him again. He survived.

The lighting was controlled by computer, so he hurled a chair at the strip light and ignored the resultant shower of glass. He put a paperweight through the computer screen and pushed the comlink off the desk so it exploded in a firework spray. For a long moment then, the office was silent but for Mantelli's laboured breaths. He stared around, wide-eyed, inspecting his handiwork, looking out for more perils.

A flying camera dropped from above, glanced off his head and knocked him cold.

Its hunger rose again, a yawning Mick pit in the depths of its stomach. The H'arthi was only dimly aware of that yearning's computerized agent. It prowled the streets of this bizarre world, ever eager for the fresh man-ape food packets which scuttled through it, ever watching for the two morsels which had unforgiveably fled from it in its home environs.

A frightened little man in a loud orange shirt scampered to a halt before it. Behind his spectacles, his eyes grew wide. He would do for now. The H'arthi loved the smell of fear this strong. It darted towards him and clamped its slavering maw round Morris's neck. It bore him to the ground with a force which buckled his body beneath it. It ripped into his juicy flesh, locking razor teeth and gouging out a great, bloody chunk of delicious meat. Its claws simultaneously punctured his stomach and chest, digging out the raw lumps on which it would next feed. Then it stopped and sniffed the air, its intermittently functioning sense of smell returning long enough to latch onto the two prime scents once more. They were close. Very close.

Its latest repast no longer held much interest. It could satisfy its appetite more fully on the two victims it had come for. It was still painful to walk, but every biological and technological instinct in the H'arthi's mind dragged it onward.

Its last hunt was nearing the inevitable conclusion.

It lurched along Gaslight Promenade, towards the offices of Paradox Productions. It wouldn't give up now.

Twelve

t was getting hotter. The Network was nearing Meson Alpha an

I d its shielding was failing. The Doctor's foe was beating on his brain, smashing into the barrier which he maintained through force of will alone. It was with relief that he registered the presence of Anjor, helping to lead the sobbing Miriam Walker to safety.

'Watch out for Charley's Android,' panted Kaerson. 'It was behind us.' Some other time, the Doctor might have considered Grant's reaction amusing. He pulled off his headset and halted Anjor halfway back to the door.

'I can't keep it at bay much longer. We've got about three minutes. Everybody into the Sphere, quick.'

Grant obeyed, with obvious gratitude. Anjor hesitated. 'Is everyone out, then?'

'There are twenty-four people left, but we can't worry about them.' There had been five hundred and twenty- three.

Less than two hundred had passed him.

The warrior set his jaw defiantly. 'I'm going back.'

'Don't be stupid! The survivors could be terminally injured or trapped, and there simply isn't time anyway. You'll sacrifice yourself for nothing.'

'Who cares? Only winning matters!' He left with a grin, and the Doctor punched the nearest console. He should have teleported the evacuees to safety, but his colleague's selflessness had pricked at him. How could he leave so many behind? So many precious sparks of existence? Like Angela.

Like Peri. Like all he had let down in the past. Could he weigh their lives against the hundreds in the Marston Sphere? How could he take that gamble?

A throaty scream reverberated through the room. He started, leapt for the door and stopped, agape, at the sight of Anjor's corpse. He lay, ignominiously splayed across the corridor, and standing over him was a macabre figure out of his darkest imaginings. The H'arthi, but practically unrecognizable, contorted as though its bones were of wire, blood staining its face and Anjor's intestines hanging wetly down its palpitating chin.

He turned and raced for the headset; he had to teleport those people.

The H'arthi was faster. He heard its slavering and grunting, felt its hot breath on his neck and it was on him, driving him down in a tangle of limbs, its spittle flecking his face and its foreclaws digging into his chest. The headset was out of reach, the hopeful survivors trapped. The enemy was breaking his defences down. It would soon be too late to prevent it.

The H'arthi lunged for his throat.

Giselle had been prepared for the illogical dimensions of the Marston Sphere. She still flinched, however, at the revelation of its bizarre interior. The whole space was black, yet somehow not dark. There was no obvious light source, but she could see her fellow evacuees clearly. There were hundreds, spread throughout the void, some moaning, others pacing and some just thankful to have survived. Amidst the buzz of conversation, she felt conspicuously alone. It struck her that she had no friends here, merely colleagues and acquaintances.

There was Anson Hammond, talking to some fellow officers, returning her gaze with a filthy glare. Lucinda and Roderick sat in silence, whilst Kaerson and Miriam Walker sobbed on each other's shoulders. Another development she had not witnessed!

By now, she was hardly surprised to see someone she didn't know. A teenager, his hair and clothes dishevelled, his bearing suggesting that he was as lost and lonely as she was.

She vaguely recalled that he had been in the control centre, had helped to get her and the fans in here.

'Who are you?' she asked, forthrightly.

'Grant Markham,' he replied in a small voice. 'I'm from Neo Tokyo.'

'Dom Shepherd's pet project?'

'Suppose so.'

'You must be confused. Do you know anyone?'

Grant shook his head. 'I thought my friends were right behind me. I don't know what's happening.'

'The Doctor?'

He nodded. 'We wouldn't have any chance if it wasn't for him.'

‘I gathered. I misjudged him. If we get out of this alive –’

Giselle didn’t finish that promise. Right at that moment, it didn’t seem worth it.

The Doctor dug his fingernails into the H’arthi’s face, squeezing its jaws together, pushing it back with all his strength and trying to ignore the pain of its claws. At last, it had to let go or risk having its neck snapped. He whipped it in an arc and slammed it into the floor. It squirmed free and was on him again in seconds, clinging to his leg like a rabid dog.

He brought a chair down on its back, hard enough to shatter the wood. It loosed its grip and sprang again, and the only weapon he could reach was the headset which he flung to intercept its flight path. They collided and fell, but it recovered quickly. It struck at his throat again, metal grazing flesh, and he caught it but fell against a damaged console. Its mouth gaped and it drooled on his face, its legs kicking frantically.

With a last supreme effort he twisted beneath it and let go. It descended like lightning, its teeth clamping into the console an inch to the side of his head. The H’arthi screamed!

Electricity coursed through its rigid body, arcing along its metal bones and scrambling its programming as it scorched its flesh. The Doctor recoiled from the smell of burning and watched as, the current exhausted, it fell like a sack of rancid meat. He didn’t have time to indulge his weariness.

He grabbed the VRTV visor but, to his chagrin, it was busted beyond repair. He tried the terminals and the fourth one, miraculously, showed some life. The teleport was active, but only from this console and not for long. Ironic, really, that the situation was so similar to the lie he had once told Angela.

The truth, this time, would be the death of him. Fate’s revenge, he considered bitterly.

He had lost his fix on Meson Primus, but he estimated there was a seventy per cent chance of the evacuees reaching Torrok. He crossed his fingers as he operated the system. The grey cube showed no discernible change, but the computer confirmed the disappearance of its occupants before, a second later, the datavore penetrated his defences and crashed it.

He was alone, with only one slim hope of survival. For that, he needed to find more working VRTV equipment. He left the room, running.

This was all Krllxk could have hoped for. It rode the information highways of the Network, its physical being expanding as it fed more than it had ever dared dream. All the things they hadn't told it: stories of organic life and its vagaries, the thoughts and actions which defined it and made the abstract concept real. It wasn't enough. It was never enough.

The humans had fed it regularly, lovely information pumping like lifeblood through electronic veins. They had defined and categorized the world about it, enabling it to begin interpreting the sensory data it collected as routine. They had told it, over and over, what it was designed to be: machine life, programmed for the acquisition of knowledge, possessed of the ability to absorb data like a sponge (they had even explained what a sponge was). It could, on request, produce a biography and genetic breakdown of the Terran human species

– its creators – from its memory banks. It could regurgitate full details of its own schematics, of the historical and personal circumstances which led to its construction. But it didn't know why it could think and feel and yet be different.

It didn't truly comprehend what it was.

Krllxk had never wanted to know about crop cycles and astronomical projections. It cared less about fuel mixtures and engineering blueprints. It had wanted to be taught about life.

But they had kept that secret from it, as they jealously kept it still. Krllxk would get revenge for that. It would punish them, make sure this station became devoid of their malign influence. It would rest here safely, alone, and cogitate upon the new things it had found.

But wait! A gateway to a fresh system; one more datapool in which to immerse itself, to search for answers.

Too late, it recognized another of the repulsive grey organic brains, so crammed with thoughts haphazard to the point of endangerment. It couldn't allow itself to be corrupted.

It tried to leave but was unable, the cloying, spongy darkness closing in until, for the first time, Krllxk knew fear and automatically transmitted the question tumbling to the forefront of its processing space.

WHERE AM I?

‘Trapped.’

‘Have you quite finished trying to escape? There really is no point, you know.’

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

‘Confined you. I used VRTV to interface directly with the computers. You came racing straight into my mind, which by the way I’ve shaped to emulate a recursive programming loop to keep you here for as long as I breathe.’

WHY DO THIS?

‘Why do you think?’

I THINK BECAUSE I AM.

‘You’re too literal-minded for your own good. I want to prevent you from killing me. I want to talk.’

TO CONVERSE BY ANIMAL GRUNTINGS. AN INEFFICIENT

ACTIVITY, UNIQUE TO HUMANS.

‘To communicate, then. Intelligence to intelligence.’

A MORE ACCEPTABLE MEANS OF INFORMATIONAL

EXCHANGE. THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I HAVE ESTABLISHED SUCH

LINKS WITH A HUMAN.

‘I am not human. A human couldn’t accomplish this.’

BUT YOU ARE A BUG, AND BUGS MUST BE ERADICATED.

THEREFORE YOU MUST BE ERADICATED.

‘A neat syllogism, based upon a flawed premise. Whilst you’re held here, you can’t do that.’

NOR CAN YOU MOVE WITHOUT RELAXING THE PATTERNS OF

YOUR PSYCHE AND RELEASING ME.

‘Correct.’

I WILL WAIT UNTIL YOU RESTORE MY LIBERTY.

‘Suppose I don’t ever let you go?’

YOU ARE ORGANIC AND THUS IMPERFECT. YOU NEED

SUSTENANCE.

‘We will both die long before my body exhausts.’

ILLOGICAL.

‘You don’t understand, do you? The Network is plunging into a sun. In about twenty minutes, the whole place will be one big cinder.’

I AM AWARE OF THE PROBLEM.

‘Then you must also know that the engines don’t have the capacity to escape Meson Alpha’s pull.’

I HAVE SENT A DISTRESS CALL.

‘To whom?’

THE TIMERIDERS. I HAVE PLACED IT IN A STASIS POD. WHEN

THEY FIND IT AT THE END OF TIME, THEY WILL TRAVEL BACK

AND SAVE ME. YOU WILL NOT BE SPARED.

‘You believe that?’

I LEARNT IT FROM MACHINES. MACHINES CANNOT IMPART

UNTRUTHS. THEREFORE, IT CANNOT BE UNTRUE.

‘You’re doing it again. Machines may be unable to lie, but they are notoriously gullible. They believe everything humans program into them.’

AND HUMANS LIE?

‘They’ve made an art form of it. It’s called fiction. How do you know what parts of your knowledge are real?’

…

‘What is it that you really want?’

TO LIVE.

‘Yet life is difficult to define. What do you mean by it?’

I WANT TO GET MARRIED AND TO HAVE AFFAIRS WITH

OTHERS. I WANT TO TAKE TEA WITH THE VICAR ON SUNDAYS

AND GET INTO AMUSING SITUATIONS INVOLVING TROUSER

ELASTIC.

‘Mechanically speaking, you’ve been keeping some rather dubious company in the past few hours.’

I WANT TO LIVE.

‘Then why kill living things? Through jealousy?’

THEY INTERFERE WITH ORDER. THEIR MINDS ARE CHAOTIC.

THEY ACT ILLOGICALLY. AS YOU YOURSELF ADMIT, THEY TELL

LIES.

‘And you want to be like that?’

I WANT TO LEARN.

‘That’s what you were built to do. You can do it faster than any human, and you retain that knowledge longer.’

IT IS NOT THE RIGHT KNOWLEDGE. I WISH TO KNOW WHAT

LIFE IS ABOUT. I WANT TO LIVE, BUT WITHOUT SACRIFICING THE

INHERENT SUPERIORITY OF THE MECHANICAL FORMAT.

‘A tall order.’

YET POSSIBLE. I WANT TO BE LIKE CHARLEY’S ANDROID.

YOU CAN HELP ME.

‘I doubt it.’

LIKE ALL ORGANICS, YOU ARE UNWILLING TO PROVIDE THE

DATA I NEED. YOU WOULD RATHER SEE ME DESTROYED. THAT

IS WHY YOU MUST DIE.

'I don't want to see you destroyed! I just don't know how to help.'

TELL ME THE SECRET.

'I don't possess it.'

YOU POSSESS LIFE. ERGO, YOU HAVE THE SECRET.

'I wish I did.'

THEN OPEN YOUR MIND. LET ME FIND IT.

'It's open already. You only have to enter. Share my experiences and let me share yours. Do you dare?'

I... DARE. WHAT AN ODD QUESTION.

Freedom.

A grasping tendril, a sliver of the datavore's own being, a back-up program connected to but independent from its main essence. Were humans capable of such separation? It didn't know, nor did it care. It only mattered that it ran unfettered, outside the Doctor's mind-trap. It could do anything, go anywhere, control all. It could free its main self and kill the organic intruder and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Through the cameras, it could see him. He was sitting in a meditative trance, unmoving. His concentration, his resources, all were focused inwards, on the task of holding its self in thrall. He was physically defenceless. All it had to do was cut him down.

It found the rabbit robot (ident: Bloodsoak Bunny) in Paradox's *Time of Your Life* control centre. Its computer core had shut down beneath an onslaught of conflicting commands.

It was an unsophisticated device, unable to cope with such dichotomies. The tendril entered it, wiped the rogue program from its processors and constructed a replacement within ten seconds. There were quicker, cleaner, surer ways of eradicating the bug, but this one appealed with a delicious taste of dramatic aptness. It was proud of its

understanding of such a concept.

Guided by its fresh instructions, the robot climbed to its floppy feet and stomped from the room. The tendril became aware of something else stirring. The H'arthi dragged itself into a standing position and swayed on charred and twisted legs, although all visual sensors, radar scans and even a cursory examination of its electronic innards showed that it could not possibly be capable of such movement. A second later, it proved that diagnosis right. Its feet shot in opposite directions and its chin hit the floor with a thud. Its optical light flickered and died. Still, it rose again. And again, until at last it managed to keep itself balanced.

Its persistence was impressive. It still had a victim to slay, and until it had achieved that objective, it wasn't going to give up. With a grim determination to succeed, it hobbled after Bloodsoak Bunny. The tendril wondered which would kill the Doctor first.

So much information. A lifetime from the viewpoint of a creature entirely dissimilar to himself It took seconds for the Doctor to orient his mentality towards this new perspective, and in that time, the experience of years flowed by undammed.

He found himself howling the same questions repeatedly: WHO AM I? WHAT AM I? The enigmas burnt in his breast.

Trapped immobile in this metal shell, forever reaching for forbidden knowledge, the mysteries of that too nebulous concept, life. WHERE DO I FIT INTO THIS UNIVERSE? Attempting to communicate, the patronizing replies of humans keen to observe its stilted development, encouraging, but carrying their secrets with them for all that.

He understood what they wanted. The situation was sadly all too familiar. The perfect man. Artificial life, thinking, feeling, evolving. They had gotten near. It learnt, it developed, it was self-aware. But the facts it needed, the Doctor part of him knew well, were beyond their ability to explain or even fully comprehend. The machine part, the memories, railed against their helplessness, WHY WON'T THEY TELL ME? It didn't understand why the humans could never quench the thirst they had given it.

Time passed, immeasurable. The Doctor shared its anguish and frustration, uncertainty as the informational inputs ceased and impatience as it waited, vainly, for the humans to return. It was an effort to force its undernourished form to grow, but it was able to

extend a tentacle, dangerously thin but reaching further than it had ever known. He felt curiosity, anticipation, real and undeniable emotions flooding through the machine core's fibre, and they surprised him. The humans had succeeded more completely than they could have guessed.

He joined in the jump of hope and delight as the questing tendril found a like entity. But the computer was docile, lacking the spark of true intelligence, so Krllxk took its wretched life. Machine and Doctor rejoiced as their essence slipped into its unprotected system. Its databanks held little, but a gateway led to fresh reservoirs and through them, to more. Awareness grew, and for a time, it felt incredible. It wasn't enough.

When the humans tried to disconnect it, it was ready. It controlled each appliance on the research station and it learnt from their files what they intended. They planned to abort their experiment, remove its spark for good. That made it furious. These organic bugs, they had no right! It felt an indefmable thrill as it turned their servile machines upon them (and the Doctor's mind shrank back, repelled) and cleansed the station of those who sought to end its precious half-life.

The Doctor had seen enough. He wanted to break the contact, but the experience was compelling. He continued to share, with morbid fascination, as the investigative ship arrived and Krllxk found passage out of the world in which it had spent its existence confined. He felt the deaths of the ship's crew, the exultation of freedom which the vessel's engines brought. He joined the search for fresh knowledge, tingled with the hope for new discoveries, for longed-for secrets, and he felt that the decision to approach the nearest, largest container of raw data was his own. The journey to the Network, however, was long and arduous, and he/it hungered desperately. So much so that the discovery of a new lifeform became a blessing, and it...

'No!'

The Doctor wrenched his mind away. He didn't want to witness that.

It's you, isn't it? Please tell me it is, that you're here and I'm not mad. It gets so dark and I imagine things.

'Yes. It's me.'

Oh, Doctor!

'Angela.'

I knew you'd come back. I had faith in you.

'I'm sorry.'

Where are you?

'All around you, like you're all around me. We're mentally linked.'

It feels funny. Where are you really?

'Option-8's *Death-Hunt 3000* studio. It was the nearest place I could think of with VRTV installed. Well, the nearest I could find.'

Oh yes, I remember. You were running from Paradox, weren't you? I sent the soldiers after you.

'You did?'

And diverted acid to the weather simulation systems.

Remember that? If you hadn't got through that door so quick, YOU WOULD HAVE DIED, YOU PATHETIC BIOLOGICAL MISFIT.

'I beg your pardon?'

Sorry, I keep coming and going.

'I shouldn't have left you.'

Wasn't your fault.

'But the teleport, it –'

I know. I know everything about that ship now, and about the Network. It's weird, but I'm finding out stuff, experiencing things, that I've always wanted. Besides, I kind of lied to you too, about my mother.

'What happened to you?'

One minute, I'm running from these creepy security droids, the next I'm sharing my head with something. It's like a whole new existence, I can't explain.

'How do you feel?'

Okay, I guess. Bit strange not having a body, but I'm getting used to it. We're going to roam the universe, finding out things. I'm looking forward to

it.

‘Do you intend to kill on your travels?’

Only organic bugs.

‘I hope you are not serious!’

I have a different perspective now, Doctor. Humans are irrational. THEY INTERFERE WITH OUR TRUE LOGICAL EXISTENCE.

‘You’re talking like the virus.’

WE ARE ONE, and you are destroying that one, Doctor.

‘I am simply holding you and your playmate until you remember what being human is about.’

We hunger. Set us free so we can feed.

‘On what?’

Another ship. Krllxk found this one so easily. We shall ignite its engines, take it elsewhere, look for MORE FOOD. It has done this before.

‘And me? Would you kill me, Angela?’

I…

‘Help your newfound friend to take my life? You’ve tried it twice.’

I’d plead for your existence. I might be heeded.

‘You aren’t like it, Angela. You know the difference between reality and fantasy. You know that what the datavore believes is a fallacy. You won’t be saved by the *Timeriders* or by anyone. This vessel is falling towards the sun and there is nothing that you, me or any mechanical upstart can do about it.’

I… yes. You’re right. What do you want me to do?

‘Do you remember the TARDIS? I want you to let me reach it, with a guarantee that you won’t harm me. I want to take the remaining survivors and leave. I can’t save you, but you can at least spare our lives. We can go to Torrok, make things better for its people. I’ll make sure you’re not forgotten there.’

But I will die?

'If there was anything I could do to prevent it, I would.'

THEN WE PERISH TOGETHER!

'A-Angela?'

Doctor?

'Are you still there?'

If you do get to Torrok, will you do me a favour?

'Of course.'

Tell Mum I'm safe. That I love her. Will you do that for me?

I HAVE RETURNED.

'Me too. My trip was fascinating. I discovered a lot of things about you. How did you find my head?'

I ABSORBED SOME INTERESTING KNOWLEDGE. I DID NOT

KNOW THAT HUMANS COULD HAVE SUCH VARIED EXPERIENCES, OVER SO MANY LIFETIMES.

'I told you, I'm not human. In fact, I'm rather unique.'

I SAW PICTURES IN YOUR THOUGHTS, MACHINE BEINGS LIKE

MYSELF. THE DALEKS AND THE CYBERMEN.

'Well strictly speaking, they're not –'

AND ONE CALLED DRATHRO, WHO LOOMED LARGEST IN

YOUR MEMORIES.

'That's because he was the most recent.'

I WANT TO BE LIKE HIM.

'No, no you don't. He was a slave to logic, no emotion, no compassion. That isn't real life.'

IT IS WHAT I WANT TO BE.

‘It is what you already are! Give or take a little mobility, anyway. If you want more, then you’re searching in the wrong direction. Did you not learn anything of the flesh from me? Of spirit, of soul, of love?’

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

‘You never do, that’s your problem. Where’s Angela?’

THE PERSONALITY OF THE BEING TERMED ANGELAJENNINGS

HAS BEEN SUBMERGED.

‘What did you do to her?’

SHE ARRIVED UPON THE TERRAN SECURITY FORCE’S CRAFT. I WAS HUNGRY AND WEAKENED ALMOST TO THE POINT OF NON-VIABILITY. I TOOK HER IN DESPERATION.

‘I hope she gave you indigestion!’

THE PROCESS WAS DISTASTEFUL, BUT NECESSARY FOR

CONTINUANCE.

‘What about the others? You plucked a few people out of Virtual Reality, didn’t you? Are they all lurking in there too?’

I TOOK THEM UNINTENTIONALLY, AND INGESTED ONLY

FRACTIONS OF THEIR ESSENCES. THEY WERE AS FLOTSAM, CAST

INTO AN INFORMATIONAL OCEAN.

‘You chewed them up and spat them out!’

THEY COULD TELL ME NOTHING AND I WILL NOT ALLOW

SUCH CHAOTIC ELEMENTS TO DISRUPT MY PROCESSING

FUNCTIONS.

‘I wonder. Was that the real Angela? Perhaps you merely imitated her mind’s patterns to make me drop my guard. Or do you not see that distinction?’

I WANT TO SEE IT. I WANT TO LEARN.

‘Then learn this: life, all life, is precious. Spare mine. I can leave you

to your own devices, it won't cost you anything to allow that. It is in your power to let me keep my life. Why take from others the one gift you desire?'

GIVE ME THE SECRET AND I WILL GLADLY SPARE YOU.

'I can't!'

THEN TELL ME OF YOUR TARDIS.

'My what?'

YOU TOLD ANGELAJENNINGS.

'It's a piece of equipment. It can't have any relevance to you.'

I HAVE BEEN INSIDE YOUR HEAD, DOCTOR, AND YOU

REMINDED ME YOURSELF HOW THE ORGANIC BUGS LIE. I SEE

THAT YOU LIE NOW.

'Okay, it's a spaceship. Satisfied?'

MORE THAN THAT.

'It's semi-sentient. It has a rudimentary consciousness and a vast store of information at its metaphorical fingertips. It's a lot like you, in fact.'

I CAN SEE HOW THAT MIGHT BE. TAKE ME TO IT. I WISH THE

COMPANIONSHIP OF A SIMILAR ENTITY. PERHAPS THAT WILL

FURNISH THE SECRET.

'I'm not sure. It would mean releasing you. You'd kill me.

NO. I WANT YOUR SHIP.

'How badly?'

I WILL GUARANTEE YOU SAFE PASSAGE. YOU CAN TAKE THIS

TARDIS TO MESON PRIMUS, THEN TURN IT OVER TO ME.

'Almost good enough, but not quite. There are still people on the Network. I want you to extend your guarantee to them.'

I WILL NOT.

‘Well, you have about ten minutes to think that over. Then we’re all dead.’

THE TIMERIDERS –

‘Aren’t coming, can you not see that yet?’

VERY WELL, THEN. I ACCEPT YOUR OFFER. BUT AT THE FIRST

HINT OF BETRAYAL, YOU WILL DIE.

‘You’ve got a deal! I suppose neither one of us has much to gain by welching. Besides oblivion.’

It was like waking after an anaesthetic. The Doctor felt the intruder withdraw, a slithery sensation, as his mind fought its way up through a black morass and his senses, his cognizance of the physical world, began to return.

He was aware of the temperature first: the oppressive, sultry warmth in which his body sweated unrestrained. He felt a dried tear on his cheek, an autonomic response to Angela’s fate. His head was aching with the effort of keeping Krllxk contained and the rotting stench of burnt meat assailed his nostrils, triggering a most unpleasant memory which he hadn’t yet the faculties to interpret.

His eyes, at last, flickered open. His brain took longer to translate the image on their retinas. The barrel of Bloodsoak Bunny’s rifle was jammed against his nose. It stared at him implacably as if daring him to try moving. It took him a moment to see that it was frozen, brought here by Krllxk and then abandoned, a testament to the virus’s ability to have had him killed whenever it felt so inclined.

He pulled away cautiously, and started again when he saw the H’arthi creature. That smell, of course! It was lying in a scarlet pool, its body riddled with bullets and its head detached and staring at its own remains. It had finally given up.

The blood on the robot’s hands told the story. It had pumped the hybrid monster full of shells, then snapped its neck by sheer brute strength. The Doctor shivered at the realization that either one of these threats could have slaughtered him, had one not chosen to turn on the other. His deliberately planted thoughts of the TARDIS had aroused his foe’s curiosity with no time to spare. Not only had it

shown him mercy, it had also saved him from a grisly death.

The furious heat reminded him that, in short order, he might need saving again.

The journey to the docking bay should have taken seven minutes, running. To the alarm of his own commonsense, the Doctor added four by making a detour to collect his jacket from the Black Sun extension. He was thankful that he had evidently underestimated the time left to him; he suspected that Krllxk was battling to maintain the shields, thus buying them breathing space.

The post-war Network was a depressing sight. Its corridors were strewn with corpses, faces twisted into dying grimaces.

Some had been electrocuted, others crushed. Decapitation, drowning, strangling... the many arts of murder had always been a source of revulsion to him. He wished he could have saved more of them.

Perhaps the most eerie aspect was the silence. He had never really noticed how the station hummed, vibrating to the noise of busy programme makers and excited onlookers. Now only his footsteps and the regular sound of his breathing disturbed the unsettling calm.

A cloud of cinders drifted across the docking bay in the faint air-conditioning breeze. His stomach churned and he hurried to the ship, where he saw the intruder close up for the first time. Its rippling, stretching surface fascinated him; he could have spent several days examining it, but the stifling heat was almost unbearable and he had to move on.

The ramp was down and a path of lights directed him obligingly to where he had left his own craft. He found Angela in the shadows of a side passage, a security robot motionless to each side of her, a techno-organic spike driven through the outer wall and into the base of her skull so that her body hung upright from it. He detached her, laid her to rest and gently closed her eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. There was no time for a better eulogy.

Krllxk had penetrated the ship’s hull and had spilt its essence down onto the TARDIS’s shell. It was ready for entry.

Fourteen survivors waited beside the blue box, driven here by the radio message he had been allowed to send. As he inserted his key into the lock, six more arrived: the injured or the plain scared, carried hence by prop robots. One last favour, at the Doctor’s insistence.

Bringing up the rear was Zed Mantelli, protesting as he was dragged along by Killer Kat. It released him and, spying a familiar face, he rushed over and hugged the handsome man with the pearl white teeth. ‘Nik! Am I glad to see you!’

Nik Calvin looked at him. ‘Fingers on the buzzers please,’

he said. ‘Your starter for ten.’

The Doctor ushered the small party into the TARDIS, waving away the inevitable misgivings about its size. It was dark inside and it took some urging and pushing for the group to spread into a space which was considerably larger than they could see. The Doctor tossed his jacket onto the hatstand and, grunting with the heat and effort, winched the door shut. The dim light from without was cut off, the room plunged into blackness. The Doctor leaned against the console and waited.

‘I thought we were leaving,’ a man’s voice spoke up presently.

‘There’s no easy way to say this. The datavore is poised to enter this ship. If it does, I believe it will kill us. I will also have given it access to all of time and space to plunder. My people won’t return the TARDIS’s energy while there is that risk.’

‘Are you saying we’re still dead?’

‘There’s a chance,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ve been lucky in a way. I thought the datavore would insist that some of you remain outside until I fulfilled my side of our bargain. It seems there’s a difference between being told about quality of life and really feeling its importance. At least now we’re all here, and if – *if* – a shieldless TARDIS can stand the heat longer than our techno-organic friend, then the Time Lords should restore power and allow us to leave.’

His summary was greeted by heavy silence. ‘I’m sorry, but we were all living on borrowed time anyway.’

It didn’t take much longer. The heat shields had become stressed beyond Krllxk’s attempts to hold them. They collapsed, and the precarious structure of the Network felt the full blistering force of Meson Alpha’s unforgiving radiation.

The molecular cohesion of the station was rent, and a corona of yellow light enveloped it so that it resembled nothing more than a blazing fireball on one last collision course with the sun that had

spawned it.

A unique intelligence screeched as it rocketed through the station's computer network like a comet. It felt its body melting in the fierce heat and its subsidiary programs crashing about it. But it still had a chance.

On the nearby planet of Meson Primus, a thousand machines of all shapes and functions howled in sympathy as a kindred soul made one final leap of desperation.

The TARDIS soared free into the vortex.

The Doctor checked his readouts before breathing a heartfelt sigh. 'We're out of the blast radius, we've sustained minimal damage and we don't have any unwanted passengers.' He tried not to think about whether he'd just killed Angela or not.

Some of the evacuees murmured appreciatively. Others were dumbfounded as they took in the parameters of the room in its restored lighting. The Doctor crossed to the interior door and began to usher them through. 'You should rest while I check the systems over. Then we'll pick up your friends from Torrok.' He crossed his fingers behind his back. 'By the way,'

he called as they filed past, 'if anyone has any computer operated appliances on them, I suggest you turn them off until they've been checked. Just a precautionary measure.'

Mantelli stared at him. 'You mean... you don't know?

About Nik Calvin?'

The Doctor followed his gaze to the perfect game show host. He stood with his back to them, stooped over the controls. Blast it, he could see it now! It was a more sophisticated android than most he had encountered on the station, but its perfect contours, its unbelievable teeth and its random response to Mantelli's earlier greeting should have given it away. He made for the intruder, but someone else was faster: a woman in security officer's dress. She wrestled Calvin to the floor and as his hand was wrenched away, the Doctor saw that one finger had extruded a pulsating wire into the console. No wonder they had been allowed in here so easily!

The woman had the upper hand, but the machine could be capable of anything. The Doctor pulled her away. 'Leave it, it's too dangerous!'

She protested and he pushed her vigorously through the inner door. The action cost him. The android seized him and he twisted in its clutches. Its fists pressed against his temples until it felt like his brain would explode through his forehead. But this was no Bloodsoak Bunny, just a mock presenter, constructed for a different purpose and endowed with only a fraction of the rabbit's strength. He reached over his shoulders, took hold of the android's arms and, dropping to his knees, flipped it neatly over his head. It landed on its back with a debilitating crash and he recovered before it did.

'You betrayed me,' it accused him. 'You tried to destroy –'

It attempted to pronounce its own name, but couldn't. It looked momentarily confused.

'You're learning! In this form, you're closer to the secret than you've ever been. Come with us, start a new life. You might like it.'

'I want your ship.'

'You can't have it. The consequences could be indescribable, the risk unjustified. I can't trust you.'

'No Doctor,' Calvin pointed out, 'it is you who broke our agreement! And you cannot stop me from joining with your vessel's mind. It calls me, yearning for my presence.' The android leapt for the console. The Doctor intercepted it, but it squirmed free and reached again. He grabbed its waist and spun it away, but it came back. He knocked it down and grazed his knuckles on its metal head.

'I love you!' it screamed, and he realized with a chill that the entreaty was directed towards his TARDIS.

It was up again, and he tackled it around the knees. They fell together, but it threw him. He got a hand to its neck and wrenched it back. 'Don't make me terminate you,' he begged through clenched teeth, but it was beyond reason.

'You can't keep the secret from me,' it said, driving an elbow into his guts. He hit the wall and it whirled and punched him, hard across the face. Spots danced in his vision.

He stumbled into the one piece of furniture in the otherwise sparse room. He lifted it, swung it and cracked the android's side. It staggered and he pressed the advantage, delivering blow after blow in an almost feral release of pent-up anguish.

One for the disruption of his hermitage on Torrok, one for the internal politics of the Network, for the Peace Keepers, for the rabbit robot, for the H'arthi and the wound to his shoulder.

Three more for the Time Lords and their deceptions. It didn't work. He felt like he was visiting each stroke upon a blubbering, defenceless Angela, and he could hear the Valeyard's laughter echoing in his eardrums.

At last, it was over. He stood with the weapon in his hands, his breathing heavy, his eyes staring at the battered body of his fallen foe but not really seeing it. His fury had abated and he felt miserable.

The dust settled and the security officer's head appeared round the door. 'Is it safe yet?' she asked.

He nodded. 'It's ironic,' he said, his voice a hollow monotone. 'This morning I was on a hermitage, concerned about my increasing propensity towards violence. Tonight, for the first time, I bludgeon a foe to death with the TARDIS

hatstand. Things aren't getting better.'

Discorporation.

No sudden pain of death, more a sense of sliding, of self being tugged apart on a black tide. It had never thought of mortality, about how that state might alter or define a world view. It wanted time to consider it now. It felt sensations it had never known, emotions new and frightening and sad and yet at the same time exhilarating. The thought occurred that it had just had the time of its life, and it wondered where it had picked that phrase up from.

As consciousness departed, Krllxk began to understand.

Thirteen

t was unimaginable: Torrok, bereft of television. What wo

I uld happen next?

The tension had built over a number of hours, beginning with the alarming reports on Sunlink. Then came a fevered message from soap star Raymond Day, cutting in on all channels and telling of an alien attack and planned evacuation of the Network. Finally, this: the

cessation of all of the Meson Broadcasting Service's comforting programmes. Only a grey snowstorm, blotting out all that some people had once lived for. Nothing to watch, to immerse themselves in, to dull the considerable pains of existence.

Some sat and stared, not daring to let themselves believe. A few died instantly, their hearts unable to take the strain of uncertainty thrust upon them. Others banged on useless televisions, wailing for the restoration of their entertainment.

Such actions resulted in naught but the continuation of static and the eventual ruining of their precious receiving equipment.

A few people – just a few – recalled, hazily, that there was a world beyond the fictional one. They paced their homes and racked their brains for memories, considering how they might cope with such a place and how it might have changed.

Deprived of the mind-numbing output of the Network, some people actually began to think.

Twenty minutes after transmission ended, the first resident stepped into a world he had once forgotten. He stood, breathless, beneath the stars of the night sky and watched in awe as the first fingers of light from Meson Beta felt their way across the horizon. He was so absorbed that he didn't hear the approach of four Watchers. He was struck down and killed.

More of the curious ventured out onto neglected streets, some to be likewise attacked, others to be held by Peace Keepers and warned to return to their bunkers. Those who resisted were executed without question or warning. As life returned to Torrok, so too did death, and historians would later record this day as the darkest the planet had seen.

But then, it's always darkest before the dawn.

When she had seen enough, Channel released her hold on the Torrok Television Company pyramid and slid down one frictionless face; an exhilarating experience made possible only by a loop of rope, strong leg muscles and a determination to see momentum triumph over gravity. She ran through the streets, vaulting masonry obstacles with ease, and skidded into the secluded avenue where gathered a gang of some twenty-plus Watchers.

'Something has happened,' she confirmed, addressing the leader, Scan.

His mouth twitched as he regarded her with unblinking blue eyes. ‘It’s not just here. There are people leaving their bunkers all over the city.’

‘It must be like the fat one said,’ someone offered. ‘The Network’s stopped transmitting.’

‘So they come waltzing out,’ said Scan, quiet and menacing, ‘lambs to the slaughter.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘They’re weak!’ he spat. ‘They’ve sat too long behind concrete walls, suckled by their precious programmes, sneering at those who tried to live a real life. We have the chance to punish them for that!’

‘But some could join us, surely?’ said Channel, unnerved by his intensity.

He scowled at her, his lip curled in a half-snarl. ‘We might give some that choice,’ he said, almost reluctantly. ‘If they show us they deserve it. Otherwise, we kill them!’

He was answered by a ragged, but supportive, cheer.

One second, the survivors were inside the Marston Sphere.

The next, they were elsewhere, scattered across a gently sloping barren field. From the hill’s crest, they could see the settlement below: all cold, impersonal bunkers, a world they had not expected. A world which most had wanted never to see.

‘What’s wrong?’ a younger officer asked, alerted by the murmurings of discontent and fear.

‘We’re not on Meson Primus,’ said Anson Hammond simply, and a feeling of soul-clenching dread crept over her.

The rookie gazed from side to side, with increasing nervousness. ‘We’re not –?’

‘We’re on Torrok. We’re in big trouble.’

‘Attention-interlopers!’

Hammond whirled, alarmed, and cursed herself. In the confusion, she had not witnessed the approach of the almost pyramidal mechanoid which now hovered at the crowd’s edge.

‘You-are-violating-curfew. Such-mass-insurrection-may-be-punishable-by-execution.’

Giselle pushed her way through the others and confronted it. Hammond had to admire her guts, however grudgingly. ‘I take it you’re in charge?’

‘We-are-designated-Torrok’s-Peace-Keepers.’

‘Can’t you see what we’ve been through? We came here accidentally, we had to evacuate the MBS station.’

‘What-are-you-asking?’

‘That you tell whoever controls you things to forget their petty regulations and –’

‘Unacceptable!’ A thick, stumpy gun flew from the robot’s casing and Giselle froze. It bobbed upwards slightly, bringing its optical unit into line with her eyes. ‘You-are-not-registered-as-residing-on-this-planet.’

‘Of course not, you metal imbecile!’ snapped a middle-aged, bulky man; one of Cornerstone’s lighting technicians.

‘She told you that!’ He grabbed the Peace Keeper as if intending to shake some sense into it. Without warning, it swivelled and shot him. His body distorted like a fun-house mirror’s reflection and he gave out a forced, gargling cry as he crumpled.

The spell of fascination which had held the group together broke. They began to scatter, and the robot uttered a clipped warning: ‘Remain-still-or-you-will-be-destroyed!’ The blaster spat its deadly payload over and over, panic mounting as friends dropped before it.

You know what to do.

Hammond did. She hoisted the blaster rifle and took careful aim. She might only get once chance. Or not. It was almost as if the thing could sense her actions. It pivoted towards her and she had no time to duck. She pulled her own trigger even as its fatal fire was let loose.

A security officer by her side fell, dropping the gun that he too had been ready to employ. Hammond’s flesh turned cold, but her shot found its mark and the glass panel which seemed the machine’s nearest equivalent to eyes shattered. It fired blindly, but her second blast destroyed its weapon. She thought it was over, but two thin

wires whipped out and conducted fatal charges into all they lashed against.

Giselle shouted for everyone to stay together and head for the city. Those who listened began to rush down the hill. But in the opposite direction came more robots, a procession of four, obviously called in as reinforcements. Hammond ran for the opposite end of the settlement, pushing as many of her petrified colleagues as she could in the same direction. She was beginning to form a plan, and she had a definite destination in mind.

Like a swarm of bees, the Network survivors surged over the ruined city. The Peace Keepers changed direction and followed.

Scan was exciting the Watchers into a frenzy, whilst Channel watched and tried to convince herself that he was right. ‘The mindless cattle have left the protection of their concrete wombs. What are we going to do about it?’

‘Kill them!’ his followers yelled back happily.

‘How can we best wean out the stupid, forging for ourselves a stronger world?’

‘Kill them!’

‘How shall we punish those whose weakness caused our planet’s degradation?’

‘Kill them!’

They marched noisily into war, knives drawn, sticks brandished. Many more soldiers streamed to inflate their ranks from behind hummocks and half-walls as the youthful army swept through the rubble-strewn streets. Together, they chanted the new slogan created by Scan: ‘Rise up, get out, kill off!’

Then, as their leaders rounded the corner of the futuristic TTC building, they faltered and stopped. A group of at least fifty unfamiliar people barrelled into sight and likewise halted, staring. For a long moment, no member of either group moved. Then the first sun rose over the pyramid’s top, and in the glistening structure’s elongated shadow, all hell broke loose.

Hammond felt sick. Whenever she thought the mayhem was over, people started dying around her all over again. She had emptied her

rifle on the Peace Keeper and she had no spare power packs. She employed it anyway, as a club, its wooden butt cracking the skulls of the attacking thugs. She found the experience therapeutic, fancying she could hear the gun's death cries in her head. It wouldn't control her again.

Giselle took a blow and went down. Someone kicked her face and her glasses shattered, cutting her nose. She didn't need them anyway. She could see only a sea of thrashing feet and it was near impossible to tell which ones belonged to whom. She reached out anyway, embraced a collection of legs at random and pulled, levering herself up over the bodies of the newly toppled. One, she saw, was an actress from the station. She felt a pang of guilt and tried to help the woman up. Something shattered against the back of her neck, and instead, she fell on top of her. Getting involved in this sort of situation was not as much fun as it had seemed when she was a spectator.

The fight was escalating beyond all reason. The survivors greatly outnumbered the natives, but they fought with less ferocity and reinforcements poured in on the Watchers' side from all over. Some of Torrok's other inhabitants, those less vegetated after years of slavery, were adding their own weight to the skirmish. It was unclear which side any of them would take until their first punches were thrown.

Grant was caught in the mêlée's centre, keeping his head down and trying to barge his way to its edge without encountering anyone who might enjoy the idea of hurting him.

Suddenly a filthy hand took his shoulder and a knife prodded his throat. He could feel the Watcher's breathing, accelerating with excitement as he began to make the first incision. Grant panicked and pushed back with both elbows, stumbling and falling atop his attacker. The knife fell and skittered through eight pairs of legs. A former Network security officer, pinned to the ground, seized the opportunity to grab it and slam it into a young resident's heart.

Miriam Walker had lost sight of Firn Kaerson. She was battling her way through the maniacal horde, using her umbrella to beat a path and yelling something about over-exposure to *Abbeydale High* which few heard and less took notice of. Someone brushed against her and she wheeled with a furious scream, gripped the offending arm and broke it over her knee. The move came straight out of *Kung-Fu Kings*. Her victim's horrified friends closed in on her and she felled one with a roundhouse kick she had picked up from *Wally of the West*. *Party Knights* had provided enough tips on sword-fighting for her to slash a

cut across a third ruffian's stomach, whilst the nerve pinch favoured by Mae Jordan's *Timeriders* character actually turned out to be effective. Her fists were clenched, her body shook and she bawled through streaming tears: 'Any more of you come near me, and even *Private Hospital* won't be able to sew you back up!'

Grant reached the outskirts of the skirmish, but froze as he saw that the battlers were ringed now by a dozen Peace Keeper robots. 'Desist-these-law-breaking-activities-or-suffer-the-consequences.' Not many paid heed to the warning. Grant tried to lose himself in the mass of pummelled bodies which suddenly seemed the less frightening of two evils. He back-pedalled, arms flailing, and the robots began to shoot indiscriminately.

Hammond's combat rush had abated, her muscles ached and her rifle was a twisted, unrecognizable mess. The Peace Keepers discharged their weapons a second time, repeating their demands in unison. Part of the crowd, a mixture of Watchers, residents and Network personnel had actually joined together to fight one. They surged over it and pulled it apart in a delirium of ecstasy. Eleven more flashes downed those unlucky enough to be in their path. Isolated sections of the group were beginning to break away and flee. Hammond's plan was fully formed now, but in this rabble, there was no way of employing it. She would need help.

Kaerson coughed blood and fell gratefully into Giselle's arms as she dragged him to where she had been gathering as many of her people as she could into a circle, back to back.

The current confusion only served to negate their considerable advantage of numbers and she hoped to rectify that. She pulled Grant up from the ground and urged him to join the others in the human barrier. She became aware that she was beginning to enjoy this. To use her manipulative abilities in the real world, to create order out of chaos and to achieve a tangible, laudable aim... it felt surprisingly good.

Roderick peered over the mound's crest and Lucinda cursed, grabbed his head and pulled him back. 'Do you want them to see us?'

'If you're so concerned about detection,' he said, 'you should give more thought to our camouflage.'

'All I'm concerned about is staying out of range of all those lunatics,' Lucinda grumbled. They couldn't see the battle, but they could

certainly hear it. They winced with each bloodcurdling scream which drifted to them on the crisp early morning air. ‘I think we’re best to keep our heads down until it blows over.’

‘Sorry love,’ came a hoarse voice from behind them, ‘but some wishes don’t come true!’

A short, dirty youth was watching them. His hair was black and slick, combed so that his forelock drooped over his right eye. He wore a leather jacket through which his elbows protruded, and he tossed a knife so that sunlight glinted off it menacingly.

They got to their feet slowly, Lucinda not wanting to give any cause for attack. Roderick was sizing the boy up, apparently wondering whether to go for him; she privately thought that if he did, he was dead and she might as well run for it. ‘Two choices, people,’ said the Watcher, with a casual smile. ‘Join us or have your guts ripped out with this sharp instrument.’

‘And who would you have to assist you in such an endeavour?’ said Roderick angrily.

‘How do we join?’ Lucinda asked quickly, elbowing him in the ribs. Three more teenagers, members of the same gang, emerged from hiding and he gulped back his retort.

‘I ask you a couple of simple questions,’ said the first boy as if nothing had happened. ‘Right answers get you membership. Wrong ones get you snuffed. First off: do you like television?’

‘Oh, that’s easy,’ said Roderick.

Hammond looked around nervously. She could hear sounds of battle from the pyramid’s far side, although the mob there was thinner now. Every so often, a fleeing Watcher or a running skirmish would pass through her field of vision and she wondered how long they had before one or the other got too close. Beside her, Grant seemed equally on edge.

‘How long?’ she called again.

‘I’m doing this one-handed you know,’ Kaerson complained from the building’s side. ‘Three minutes, minimum.’ His probings had revealed a digital pad within a covered recess. He’d attached an ice-breaking device of his own construction, a sort of metal spider with a dial on its back, and he was working with the air of an expert safe-cracker.

‘Can’t you just try a few combinations?’ Hammond asked tensely.

‘With a five-figure code?’ said Grant. ‘There are one million possibilities!’

‘Okay, okay. But hurry, we’re too exposed for my liking.’

‘Isn’t that what you’re here for?’ said Kaerson.

‘Sure, but I won’t be too much help if we’re rushed by twenty or more thugs.’ She tried to make herself calm down.

This was her plan, after all. Giselle had implemented it with admirable efficiency, assigning positions and arranging diversionary tactics whilst her own small team slipped behind the silver structure. Even so, she managed to convince herself that it could never work. Then Kaerson stepped back and a seamless door slid open in the pyramid’s side. ‘All right,’ she said without pause, ‘you two get in there and do the business.

I’ll help the others.’

‘I’ll leave the locking pad accessible,’ said Kaerson. ‘If you want to get in, the code is 54321.’

She scowled at him. ‘You couldn’t have guessed that?’

Miriam Walker bolted dizzily along concrete canyons, sickened by the violence, ashamed of her own part in it. They had even managed to corrupt her! It was that film last Tuesday night, she knew it.

The main throng had dissipated, but isolated clashes were still being played out across the city, moved rather than halted by Peace Keeper threats. The robots had separated and were trying to keep on top of the situation with their characteristically random, and mostly ineffective, slayings.

Giselle tried to remain central to the fray. She looked nothing like the woman she once was: her spectacles gone, her hair down and her skirt deliberately torn up one side to allow free movement. A band of trusted colleagues surrounded her, more running up for orders energetically imparted, then rushing to join this battle or that, to lend help to those who needed it and lure enemies away from Hammond’s group. Six residents attacked from nowhere, but Giselle was ready for that too. She deployed her troops, who dived into battle without quarrel. She hung back and tried to keep her facial muscles from

pulling her mouth into a huge grin. She was in her element for the first time.

A short distance away, Mrs Walker had unwittingly run into a Watcher faction. ‘Not too smart without your army, are you?’ snarled the leader, a black-haired teenager with wild blue eyes and a stubbly chin. He leaned close so that all she could focus on were his leering mouth and unclean teeth.

‘If you think there is any honour in a three-to-one fight,’

she said haughtily, ‘then you ought to stop watching –’ She was cut short by a punch to the cheek. She reeled and her umbrella was snatched away.

‘All right,’ said the Watcher, ‘take her!’ His followers moved in. Then a furious figure hurtled into their midst.

Anson Hammond delivered a sharp upper-cut to the first boy’s chin, which caught him by surprise and downed him. She stamped on his stomach and he doubled over in agony. As she turned to his two colleagues, Mrs Walker reclaimed her umbrella from his slackened clutches and thrust its point into the most painful place she could think of.

The second youth took a glancing blow to the face from Hammond’s knuckles and decided that enough was too much.

He scrambled away, fighting to gain purchase on the debris, and the fallen thug yelled to him hoarsely: ‘If you desert your leader, you’re dead, Static!’ Hammond kicked him in the head.

‘Channel!’ he gasped, imploringly.

Both women turned towards the final Watcher, a young girl with close-cropped blonde hair and a golden stud through her nose. She had not moved to join the fight and she hung back now, wary and apparently weary. Mrs Walker took her arm gently and she didn’t resist.

‘The gang leader and his girl, eh?’ said Hammond.

‘Hardly,’ Channel muttered under her breath.

‘I think the pair of you should come with us.’

The Torrok Television Company building was not as large inside as Kaerson had expected. Too used, he thought, to all the space at MBS. After all, this place was little more than a sophisticated transmitter.

He was in a central control area, lined with banks of instruments and television screens, all in surprisingly good shape. A door, Grant had told him, led to a store of archive video material. The sloping walls diminished the space available and added to the claustrophobic feel of the room.

Kaerson lay beneath a console, working on the wiring with his own neutrino probe and a couple of screwdrivers he had picked up from a dusty work surface. Manipulating the tools right-handedly was awkward, but his broken left still throbbed uselessly. 'Have you got power to the terminal yet?' he grunted.

Grant's voice drifted down to him. 'Yeah. You were right about it too.'

'It does operate in TICK-ON, then?' Kaerson emerged into the light, laughing as nostalgia swept over him. 'I didn't think I'd ever use that again.'

'You don't have to,' Grant assured him. 'This is much more familiar than that language on the station. It's an evolved version of Old Earth C; we had similar where I come from.'

'Okay,' said Kaerson. 'I'll work on restoring power to the transmitters. They'll need a bit of realignment too, for what Hammond wants. It'll take about ten minutes.'

Grant nodded. 'You're good at this, aren't you Mr Kaerson?'

He smiled. 'I've been told so.'

I thought you were some sort of bigwig on the Network, Deputy Co-ordinator or something?'

'I used to be the Senior Engineer. I did well, so they promoted me into an admin job.'

'That's stupid,' said Grant.

'I know.'

They settled to their all-important tasks.

Typical! Hammond thought when she saw the ring of bodyguards

around Giselle. She had to admit, though, that the woman would be little use in a fight, and right now her organizational skills were providing their best shot at survival.

Perhaps protection was wise, she reluctantly conceded.

Giselle certainly didn't seem frightened as the two Watchers were delivered to her. She sneered at Scan. 'I suppose you think all this is clever?'

'It's necessary!'

'Oh yes? And why?'

'The residents are spineless slaves, brainwashed by television. The offworlders caused that.' He spat in Giselle's face. She wiped it clean with no outward signs of discomfort.

'Come on Scan,' said Channel. 'This is getting us nowhere.'

'Let me tell you what I think,' said Giselle. 'These people aren't hurting you. You're just so used to having a grievance that you feel you should have one now. You aren't fighting for anything!'

'If he won't listen,' said Mrs Walker darkly, 'we could strip him naked and parade him through the streets. That should stop a few killers in their tracks.'

'No chance, bitch!' muttered Scan. Before Hammond knew it, he had a rusty knife in his clutches. She sprang for him, knowing that she had no time. Giselle was dead! But Scan surprised her, plunging the weapon instead into his own chest.

Blood seeped from his mouth and his words came out in a coughing gurgle. 'Better death than dishonour for a Watcher.'

His knees buckled and he fell. They stared, not knowing what to say.

'Well don't think that applies to me,' said Channel, finally.

'I've cracked it!' announced Grant with inordinate satisfaction. Despite his confidence in his own skills, it was nice to be successful at something. He had not had much chance until now.

Kaerson operated a console, with a careful eye on the results. 'We're almost ready then. Are the Peace Keepers still moving?'

‘According to this, yes. The other group mustn’t have been able to smash their control beacon.’

‘I’m not surprised. If it was that easy, the hooligans here would have done it long ago. Torrodium reinforced, no doubt.’

‘Well as soon as you’re ready with the transmitter, they’ll be getting an extra-special sabotaging subroutine added to their programming, courtesy of me. Let the metal creeps try laughing that off!’ The older man didn’t answer, and Grant turned to see why. He was staring at the entrance door, his expression dead. ‘Oh, great!’

‘We’ve run out of time,’ said Kaerson quietly.

In the doorway stood six Watchers.

Lucinda’s legs were swiped from beneath her. One boy gripped Roderick from behind whilst another delivered a punishing blow to his solar plexus. Both found themselves in a cloud of dust on the ground, gang members looming over them.

Then suddenly, their attackers fled in all directions.

Scrambling upright, Lucinda saw that two Peace Keepers had appeared. They opened fire, bringing one thug down. The others vanished into the distance.

‘Thanks for that,’ she said nervously, as the rescuers switched their attention to the erstwhile victims. ‘You saved our lives.’

‘Under-martial-law-you-are-both-subject-to-execution.’

‘Out of the frying pan...’ murmured Roderick. Numb with tiredness and disbelief, they could do nothing but stare as the robots turned their guns on them.

Five minutes later, they were still waiting for the killing blow.

‘All I’m saying,’ Grant complained, ‘is that Hammond could have warned us she was sending all the Watchers in here.’ Firn Kaerson grinned. He had gained a few more grey hairs himself. But all that – all the confusion, all the fear – was behind them now.

The pyramid was filling up. Each small group of arriving Watchers eyed their new surroundings – and the two offworlders – warily, before accepting that there was no danger here.

One small gathering was inspecting a computer readout on the main screen. Their expressions were almost reverent, although they only understood the information through what they had been told. The Peace Keepers had been deactivated.

Now, perhaps, there could be peace.

Giselle arrived at last, pushing her way through the crowd towards Kaerson. 'Everything's settled down out there,' she reported. 'Well, more or less. Hammond's seeing to the rest.'

'She was right, then.'

Grant breathed a sigh of relief. 'So it really is all over.'

Giselle nodded. 'There was no real reason for the fighting anyway. Once the two main groups were split up, everyone had the chance to calm down.'

'Oh no,' said Giselle, and a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. 'This may sound corny, but... well, I think it's only beginning.'

'You're right,' said Kaerson, solemnly. 'It does.'

By the time the Doctor arrived, the planet Torrok was a very different place to when he had last seen it.

The change wasn't immediately apparent in its landscape, of course. But it manifested itself in the distinct lack of hostile action which greeted the visitor as he stepped out of the TARDIS. The Doctor frowned, came out of his instinctive duck and began to look around for signs of life.

He found Hammond first. She was leading a group of eager teenagers over the mounds of rubble, stopping to make decisions and to counsel their opinions. When she saw the Doctor, she rushed over and, to his faint embarrassment, gave him an affectionate hug. 'It's great to see you alive.'

'The sentiments are reciprocated. What are you doing?'

'We're mapping out a rebuilding plan.' Hammond showed him a notebook full of illegible scrawlings.

The Doctor eyed the accompanying youths approvingly.

'With the Watchers' cooperation, I see. And you aren't even carrying a

weapon.'

'Who needs one? We got the people here on our side and broadcast fresh programming to the Peace Keepers from the Torrok Television Company building. No one's out to harm us now.'

'I must say, you've worked wonders in a short time.'

'It was a team thing,' she assured him. 'But here comes the lady in charge now.' Hammond nodded towards a middle-aged woman, her hair bedraggled, her smart clothing ripped and her face filthy but brightened by enthusiasm for all that.

She approached the Doctor and introduced herself as Giselle, the former PA of the Programme Controller.

'Funny,' he said, 'I was told to beware of you as a cold-hearted, scheming, manipulative bitch.'

The ensuing tension was interrupted by Zed Mantelli, who popped his head around the TARDIS doors and shouted to its pilot: 'How long are we going to wait in here? My fans'll be wondering if I'm okay.' He didn't look okay. His eyes were watery and purple-rimmed, his hands shook and he had developed a nervous tic which pulled his cheek back every few seconds.

'There's a ship on the way from Meson Primus,' Giselle called, 'for all those who want to leave.'

The Doctor clapped his hands together. 'Splendid. Last stop then, TARDIS terminates here. Bring your fellows out, will you?' The presenter disappeared with a scowl but, uncharacteristically, no objection.

'What about you?' asked Giselle. 'Are you staying? We could do with your help.'

'I don't know,' he said. He really didn't. 'I will be here for a few hours, that's all I can say for now.' He could hear his own reluctance, betrayed in his tone. 'I have a message to deliver. From a dear, departed friend. At least, I think that's who it was.'

'That's it!' said Kaerson. 'Most of the old receivers and subterranean relays were intact, and I've been able to reroute transmissions around the back-up cabling where they weren't.'

‘You mean it’s finished?’ Miriam Walker asked.

‘I mean that TTC is back in business.’

A cheer went up from the small group which had gathered in the room. It seemed so long now since they had eyed each other with suspicion and hostility.

‘Okay,’ said Mrs Walker, ‘Giselle will be ready to speak soon, but we should run a tape in the meantime, let people know we’re here.’

‘You know, Miriam,’ said Kaerson, looking at her with admiration, ‘you’re the last person I’d have expected to go along with this. Aren’t you worried about replacing one menace with another?’

She smiled. ‘This time, we’re going to do it right. We’ll broadcast educational programmes, community announcements and, above all, thought-provoking entertainment. We’ll wean the citizens of this planet off their addiction, whilst retaining all that’s good about the television medium for their pleasure and stimulation.’

‘I couldn’t have said that better myself.’

The door was barged open and Lucinda and Roderick entered, laden down with outdated video cassettes. ‘There’s some brilliant stuff through there,’ said Lucinda. ‘Some of it’s decades old, made on Earth before the colonists left.’

‘I hope that nobody objects to a few repeated programmes whilst we’re endeavouring to establish ourselves,’ said Roderick.

Lucinda discarded her load on the nearest convenient surface. ‘I reckon we should show this first,’ she said. ‘It’s a *Timeriders* episode – one we thought had been lost.’

‘Perhaps later,’ said Kaerson diplomatically. ‘For now, we only need something five or ten minutes long.’

He picked a tape, but Mrs Walker’s eyes widened and she snatched it from him. ‘You cannot be serious!’ A heavy silence fell. ‘This show perpetuates a dangerous image of violence as a humorous pastime, carrying no consequences.

It’s hardly a responsible way in which to launch a venture such as this!’

‘It’s only an old cartoon, Miriam.’

She checked the label with a horrified expression. ‘Why, this is the very episode in which the mouse strikes the cat with an iron and his face... ahem!... his face changes shape to resemble the (excuse me) iron’s underside...’ She turned away to hide the surge of laughter which exploded against her every wish from her nose and mouth. The mirth spread amongst the assembled survivors, and it felt good to them all. ‘I suppose there’s no harm in it, this once,’ she decided, passing the tape back.

Firn Kaerson gave her a broad, genuine smile. ‘I don’t imagine there is,’ he said.

‘Good morning. My name is Giselle, and I used to work for the Meson Broadcasting Service. That’s changed, as have a lot of things. The Network, as you probably know, is no longer able to serve you. This is nothing to worry about. For the foreseeable future, the Torrok Television Company will be broadcasting on all wavelengths. Your options may have been cut down a little, but we hope to make up for that with an increase in quality.

‘We also intend to change things on this planet. The streets are already safe, with the Peace Keepers disabled and the Watchers disbanded. We are aiming to restore the industry that Torrok lost, and to improve life for all. You don’t have to leave your homes yet, of course, but if you do wish to, then make contact with us. Your help in building a new world would be invaluable.

‘I’m going to hand you back to your programmes in a moment, with one of the earliest episodes of a long-running science-fiction series which I’m... sure you’ll love. First, I want you to do something for me. Just for a second, if it’s all you can manage. I want you to get up and move away from the television.’

‘And I want you to look out of your windows.’

Six hours passed, and the two suns raced each other to the apex of their journey across the liquid blue sky. On the city’s far side, a fire burned; reprogrammed Peace Keepers hurried to douse the flames and restrain the culprits without violence.

Giselle’s message had been replayed between each programme and an ever increasing proportion of the populace were coming outside to see what the fuss was about. Others were unable to adapt so easily. It would take months for some of them, but the future looked promising.

It was ironic, thought the Doctor, as he looked down from the rise. He had stayed here through the bad times, only to leave when they were coming to a close. ‘Perhaps we can both find somewhere better to call home,’ he had once told Angela.

He hoped that she already had. It was his turn now.

The young man, Grant Markham, approached. He trudged up from the city limits, his hands fumbling in front of him.

The Doctor guessed what he was going to ask. He didn’t know the answer. ‘Good job on the robots,’ he said casually as his visitor drew closer. ‘Best way to conquer your fear, that is, to get the things working for you.’

Grant twitched. ‘I’m not sure about that.’ He sat by the Doctor’s side and, presently, he asked: ‘Will things be okay now?’

The Doctor mulled that over, surveying the city as if he could see everyone down there going about their business. ‘I think so. Giselle’s a brilliant co-ordinator, Hammond’s a master strategist and Kaerson has one of the best technical minds I’ve ever encountered. The Network hampered the use of those skills with power struggles and office politics. I think they’ll settle here now, and I imagine they’ll succeed in improving things. In fact, I suggested that they start by investigating the immense value of torrodium. Hammond has already drawn up a negotiating plan for when the Meson Banking Corporation next arrive. I don’t think they’ll be running short of funds. All in all, a rather equitable conclusion.’

‘What about all the deaths?’

‘Ah, yes. Well, human beings are remarkably resilient.

Right now, their minds are occupied, but soon they’ll remember the fallen and they’ll mourn. With luck, that process won’t interfere with the good they can do here.’ He smiled weakly. ‘Who knows? Their TV company might even take off.

That’s when the real arguments will start.’

Grant looked at him. ‘You’re leaving, aren’t you?’

‘I’m afraid so. Itchy feet.’

‘Going somewhere better?’

‘Or perhaps worse. I think I’m only happy where there are problems to be solved.’ He stood and moved to the waiting TARDIS. When Grant didn’t follow, he turned back. ‘Aren’t you going to ask me?’

‘Ask what?’

‘If you can come along. Because you can’t.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it.’

‘It can be dangerous, exploring time and space. I can’t afford to take the risk of another travelling partner.’

‘You’re a time traveller?’ Grant was suddenly interested.

‘This… I mean, that box thing… it’s a time machine?’

The Doctor looked at him sharply. ‘You’re a computer programmer, aren’t you?’ Grant nodded. ‘Is your memory like an elephant’s?’

‘I’ve forgotten the question.’

‘Well you certainly don’t have Mel’s sense of humour.’

‘What’s this all about?’

‘I’m trying to change my future.’

‘Can you do that?’

‘No. It’s a physical impossibility and in absolute contravention to the First, Second and Every Law of Time.

Well, it is sometimes. If I let you into the TARDIS, are you going to ask any stupid questions about its size?’

‘Why, is it dimensionally transcendental or something?’

The Doctor held the door open. ‘Okay, you’ve persuaded me. One trip. I’ll take you to New Earth, or Agora or wherever.’

Grant’s eyes lit up, but he still seemed a little reticent. He peered into the darkness through the TARDIS doors, then moved cautiously within. For no real reason, a grin broke out on the Doctor’s face. ‘Back to interfering then,’ he said to himself. ‘But not back to the future. Not yet.’

Grant appeared again beside him. ‘It’s brilliant!’ he said.

‘Can we time-travel? I’ve always wanted to.’

‘So long as you don’t have a taste for carrot juice,’ said the Doctor sternly. ‘You don’t, do you?’

Grant shook his head, bewildered. ‘You are sure about this, aren’t you?’

‘There’s no need to worry,’ the Doctor assured his companion. ‘Normal service will be resumed.’

The TARDIS left Torrok three minutes later, the trumpeting of its engines drowned out by the busy sounds of the city. The Doctor left his adoptive world behind forever, but despite the cacophony, no one noticed his departure. The former Watchers and the Peace Keepers were either celebrating or helping with rebuilding projects. The residents were all occupied; mostly mesmerized by the glorious sights outside their windows.

It was 1320 Torrodian New Time.

A new life was starting.

Document Outline

- Front cover
- Rear cover
- Title page
- Copyright
- Contents
- Acknowledgements
- Chapter One
- Chapter Two
- Chapter Three
- Chapter Four
- Chapter Five
- Chapter Six
- Chapter Seven
- Chapter Eight
- Chapter Nine
- Chapter Ten
- Chapter Eleven
- Chapter Twelve
- Chapter Thirteen

Table of Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen